

This is an anthology of stories by some of the world's greatest writers of short stories. It has been compiled by India's greatest writer of fiction for children, Ruskin Bond. Due to years of interaction with children and his deep knowledge of English literature he has put together a variety of themes and writing styles. There is adventure and mystery, there is humour and pathos, there is the joy of life and the pain of death.

IMMORTAL STORIES

Edited by Ruskin Bond

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Rama Sagar

Preface

In some ways the lives of Indian children aren't very different from anywhere else. Their aspirations, what gives pleasure or sorrow, are universal.

Sad to acknowledge though, in this age of media entertainment and telecommunications, there is not enough exposure to classic literature for the children of India. I have been writing for children for the last so many years. However, over the past few years, through my numerous interactions with children I have sadly come to realize that classic literature is an unknown entity for today's generation. So, I've ventured to put together a set of some of the most loved classic stories, with a smattering of a few modern ones.

It is anticipated that this compilation of short stories of different literary genres will meet the expectations and demands of the teachers and students alike.

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The Beggar

Anton Chekhov

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Anton Chekhov was born in Russia. In 1879 he joined his family in Moscow and immediately started his medical studies. He supported the family by writing brief comedies and short stories during his days as a medical student at the University of Moscow. After graduating in 1884 with a degree in medicine, he began to freelance as a journalist and writer of comic sketches. Early in his career, he mastered the form of the one-act play and produced several masterpieces including *The Bear* (1888) and *The Wedding* (1889). He produced some hilarious one-act plays but his reputation as a great dramatist came only after he wrote some full-length tragedies. In fact, it was not until the Moscow Art Theater's production of *The Seagull* (1897) that Chekhov enjoyed his first overwhelming success. In 1899, Chekhov gave the Moscow Art Theatre a revised version of *The Wood Demon*, now titled *Uncle Vanya* (1899). *The Three Sisters* (1901) and *The Cherry Orchard* (1904).

He died of tuberculosis on July 14, 1904, at the age of forty-four, in a German health resort. Since his death, Chekhov's plays have gained great popularity worldwide and he is considered the greatest Russian storyteller and dramatist of modern times.

ABOUT THE STORY

Anton Chekhov's short stories are popular for their sudden unexpected twists in the end. In 'The Beggar' the protagonist who gives himself the credit of putting 'a man on the right path' is surprised when told that it actually was his 'ill-tempered' cook who sets the beggar right.

The advocate Skvortsoff looked at the ragged, fawn-coloured overcoat of the suppliant, at his dull, drunken eyes, at the red spot on either cheek, and it seemed to him as if he had seen this man somewhere before.

"I have now had an offer of a position in the province of Kaluga," the mendicant went on, "but I haven't the money to get there. Help me kindly; I am ashamed to ask, but — I am obliged to by circumstances."

Skvortsoff's eyes fell on the man's overshoes, one of which was high and the other low, and he suddenly remembered something.

"Look here, it seems to me I met you the day before yesterday in Sadovaya Street," he said; "but you told me then that you were a student who had been expelled, and not a village schoolteacher. Do you remember?"

"N-no, that can't be so," mumbled the beggar, taken aback. "I am a village schoolteacher, and if you like I can show you my papers."

"Have done with lying! You called yourself a student and even told me what you had been expelled for. Don't you remember?"

Skvortsoff flushed and turned from the ragged creature with an expression of disgust.

"This is dishonesty, my dear sir!" he cried angrily. "This is swindling! I shall send the police for you, damn you! Even if you are poor and hungry, that does not give you any right to lie brazenly and shamelessly!"

The waif caught hold of the door-handle and looked furtively round the antechamber, like a detected thief.

"I — I'm not lying —" he muttered. "I can show you my

papers."

"Who would believe you?" Skvortsoff continued indignantly. "Don't you know that it's a low, dirty trick to exploit the sympathy which society feels for village schoolteachers and students? It's revolting!"

Skvortsoff lost his temper and began to berate the mendicant unmercifully. The impudent lying of the ragamuffin offended what he, Skvortsoff, most prized in himself: his kindness, his tender heart, his compassion for all unhappy beings. That lie, an attempt to take advantage of the pity of its 'subject', seemed to him to profane the charity which he liked to extend to the poor out of the purity of his heart. At first the waif continued to protest innocence, but soon he grew silent and hung his head in confusion.

"Sir!" he said, laying his hand on his heart, "the fact is I—was lying! I am neither a student nor a schoolteacher. All that was a fiction. Formerly I sang in a Russian choir and was sent away for drunkenness. But what else can I do? I can't get along without lying. No one will give me anything when I tell the truth. With truth a man would starve to death or die of cold for lack of a lodging. You reason justly, I understand you, but—what can I do?"

"What can you do? You ask what you can do?" cried Skvortsoff, coming close to him. "Work! That's what you can do! You must work!"

"Work—yes. I know that myself: but where can I find work? By God, you judge harshly!" cried the beggar with a bitter laugh. "Where can I find manual labour? It's too late for me to be a clerk because in trade one has to begin as a boy; no one would ever take me for a porter because they

couldn't order me about; no factory would have me because for that one has to know a trade, and I know none."

"Nonsense! You always find some excuse! How would you like to chop wood for me?"

"I wouldn't refuse to do that, but in these days even skilled woodcutters find themselves sitting without bread."

"Huh! You loafers all talk that way. As soon as an offer is made you, you refuse it. Will you come and chop wood for me?"

"Yes, sir; I will."

"Very well; we'll soon find out. Splendid—we'll see—"

Skvortsoff hastened along, rubbing his hands, not without a feeling of malice, and called his cook out of the kitchen.

"Here, Olga," he said, "take this gentleman into the wood-shed and let him chop wood."

The tatterdemalion scarecrow shrugged his shoulders, as if in perplexity, and went irresolutely after the cook. It was obvious from his gait that he had not consented to go and chop wood because he was hungry and wanted work, but simply from pride and shame, because he had been trapped by his own words. It was obvious, too, that his strength had been undermined by vodka and that he was unhealthy and did not feel the slightest inclination for toil.

Skvortsoff hurried into the dining-room. From its windows one could see the wood-shed and everything that went on in the yard. Standing at the window, Skvortsoff saw the cook and the beggar come out into the yard by the back door and make their way across the dirty snow to the shed. Olga glared wrathfully at her companion, shoved him aside with her elbow, unlocked the shed, and angrily banged the door.

"We probably interrupted the woman over her coffee," thought Skvortsoff. "What an ill-tempered creature!"

Next he saw the pseudo-teacher, pseudo-student seat himself on a log and become lost in thought with his red cheeks resting on his fists. The woman flung down an axe at his feet, spat angrily, and, judging from the expression of her lips, began to scold him. The beggar irresolutely pulled a billet of wood toward him, set it up between his feet, and tapped it feebly with the axe. The billet wavered and fell down. The beggar again pulled it to him, blew on his freezing hands, and tapped it with his axe cautiously, as if afraid of hitting his overshoe or of cutting off his finger. The stick of wood again fell to the ground.

Skvortsoff's anger had vanished and he now began to feel a little sorry and ashamed of himself for having set a spoiled, drunken, sick man to work at menial labour in the cold.

"Well, never mind," he thought, going into his study from the dining-room. "I did it for his own good."

An hour later Olga came in and announced that the wood had all been chopped.

"Good! Give him half a rouble," said Skvortsoff. "If he wants to he can come back and cut wood on the first day of each month. We can always find work for him."

On the first of the month the waif made his appearance and again earned half a rouble, although he could barely stand on his legs. From that day on he often appeared in the yard and every time work was found for him. Now he would shovel snow, now put the wood-shed in order, now beat the dust out of rugs and mattresses. Every time he received from twenty to forty copecks, and once, even a pair of old trousers

were sent out to him.

When Skvortsoff moved into another house he hired him to help in the packing and hauling of the furniture. This time the waif was sober, gloomy, and silent. He hardly touched the furniture, and walked behind the wagons hanging his head, not even making a pretence of appearing busy. He only shivered in the cold and became embarrassed when the carters jeered at him for his idleness, his feebleness, and his tattered, fancy overcoat. After the moving was over Skvortsoff sent for him.

"Well, I see that my words have taken effect," he said, handing him a rouble. "Here's for your pains. I see you are sober and have no objection to work. What is your name?"

"Lushkoff."

"Well, Lushkoff, I can now offer you some other, cleaner employment. Can you write?"

"I can."

"Then take this letter to a friend of mine tomorrow and you will be given some copying to do. Work hard, don't drink, and remember what I have said to you. Goodbye!"

Pleased at having put a man on the right path, Skvortsoff tapped Lushkoff kindly on the shoulder and even gave him his hand at parting. Lushkoff took the letter, and from that day forth came no more to the yard for work.

Two years went by. Then one evening, as Skvortsoff was standing at the ticket window of a theatre paying for his seat, he noticed a little man beside him with a coat collar of curly fur and a sealskin cap. This little individual timidly asked the ticket seller for a seat in the gallery and paid for it in copper coins.

"Lushkoff, is that you?" cried Skvortsoff, recognising in the little man his former wood-chopper. "How are you? What are you doing? How is everything with you?"

"All right. I am a notary now and get thirty-five roubles a month."

"Thank Heaven! That's fine! I am delighted for your sake. I am very, very glad, Lushkoff. You see, you are my godson, in a sense. I gave you a push along the right path, you know. Do you remember what a roasting I gave you, eh? I nearly had you sinking into the ground at my feet that day. Thank you, old man, for not forgetting my words."

"Thank you, too," said Lushkoff. "If I hadn't come to you then I might still have been calling myself a teacher or a student to this day. Yes, by flying to your protection I dragged myself out of a pit."

"I am very glad, indeed."

"Thank you for your kind words and deeds. You talked splendidly to me then. I am very grateful to you and to your cook. God bless that good and noble woman! You spoke finely then, and I shall be indebted to you to my dying day; but, strictly speaking, it was your cook, Olga, who saved me."

"How is that?"

"Like this. When I used to come to your house to chop wood she used to begin: "Oh, you sot, you! Oh, you miserable creature! There's nothing for you but ruin." And then she would sit down opposite me and grow sad, look into my face and weep. "Oh, you unlucky man! There is no pleasure for you in this world and there will be none in the world to come. You drunkard! You will burn in hell. Oh, you unhappy one!" And so she would carry on, you know, in that strain.

I can't tell you how much misery she suffered, how many tears she shed for my sake. But the chief thing was—she used to chop the wood for me. Do you know, sir, that I did not chop one single stick of wood for you? She did it all. Why this saved me, why I changed, why I stopped drinking at the sight of her I cannot explain. I only know that, owing to her words and noble deeds a change took place in my heart; she set me right and I shall never forget it. However, it is time to go now; there goes the bell." Lushkoff bowed and departed to the gallery.

The Miracle of Lava Canyon

O'Henry

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

O. Henry, along with Chekhov and Maupassant, made the short story what it is today. His actual name was William Sidney Porter. He was born in 1862.

Immensely popular during his lifetime, he continues to delight millions of readers all over the world. His stories are characterized by a final twist which gives a surprise ending to an exceptionally well-crafted structure.

Coming from a middle-class home, Porter left school at the age of fifteen and became, in turn, a pharmacist, cowboy, mailman, cook, draftsman, clerk in a real estate firm, bank clerk, printer and finally, a regular contributor of short stories to the country's largest newspaper, *New York Sunday World*.

He died in 1910.

Among his most popular collections of short stories are *The Four Million* (1906), *Heart of West* (1907), *The Trimmed Lamp* (1907), *The Gentle Gaffer* (1908), *The Voice of the City* (1908), *Options* (1909), *Roads of Destiny* (1909), *Whirligigs* (1910), and *Strictly Business* (1910).

ABOUT THE STORY

In 'The Miracle of Lava Canyon' a strange miracle takes place in the arid confines of Siskiwah County. Rad Conrad is seemingly the most courageous sheriff to his people. He harbours a secret — that he is actually a coward.

Boadicea Reed, on the other hand, had never known fear or any other feminine weaknesses. In a miracle the souls of the two pass into each other.

The sheriff of Siskiwah County, Ari, had a secret. He never told it to his best friend, but it was never out of his own mind. He was a physical coward. A shot fired set his heart beating wildly, and he turned sick at strife and carnage. His pulse beats averaged 95 per minute and his heart turned cold every time a summons for arrest was placed in his hands. He experienced a sensation of nervous dread each time he swung himself upon the back of his high-spirited horse. Every sudden sound conveying presage of danger thrilled him with fright. His disposition was high-strung, sensitive and unalterably timid. And yet "Rad" Conrad was known as the coolest and most courageous sheriff in this territory. He had attained his reputation by a daily and hourly struggle with his whole moral force against his natural weakness. His fear of danger, great as it was, had been subordinate to a greater fear lest his failing be known. How to hide his cowardice from the world was his own aim. With a cold fear in his heart he sought danger with the eagerness of one who loved its every phase. Quiet, persistent, plodding in his way; without any of the Western dash and audacity belonging to most men in his occupation, he continually sought the closest risks and hazards, driven by an abnormal desire to appear fearless. Men who had no conception of the meaning of the word "fear" sometimes stood apart, aghast at the man's daring, and admired him. Apparently without the slightest excitement, almost sullen of aspect, he trailed desperate criminals to their rendezvous, engaged in combat against mighty odds and waged such relentless war upon desperadoes and outlaws that his fame as an upholder of law and order was spread far and wide.

Radcliff Conrad kept his secret well. Not a man in Siskiwah county had ever seen him flinch from his duty, and tales were told in saloons and camps of his intrepidity and recklessness.

The sheriff's personal appearance aided him. He was strongly and finely formed. He possessed a blond head of classic mold, and a steel-blue eye under good control. His inward struggles kept him at a tension that gave him a reserved and somewhat preoccupied manner, and his every action seemed the result of deliberation instead of impulse. The giving away to impulse was the thing he was trying to avoid. He felt that some day his moral courage would fail him, and he would stand stripped to the gaze of his friends, the coward that he knew himself to be. No monkish ascetic ever scourged his fleshly sins as Radcliff Conrad did his own egregious failing. How well he succeeded in triumphing over it, his fame in Lava Canyon and, indeed, in the mouths of men as far as the sage brush grew to east and west attested.

There came one cruel day when the sheriff was forced to apply the whip to his tortured spirit with double force. The town of Lava Canyon was built on a stretch of plain sloping down to a river from the exit of a mountain gulch. Within this gulch was a tangled wilderness. Two miles back from the town it converged to a fissure half a mile deep, like a sword-cut cleaving the hills. The sides, for its whole extent, were inaccessible except to the rattlesnakes that made their dens among the boulders. Within the edge of the gulch, where the densely wooded sides began to straighten to steeper angles, stood the white-painted cottage of Emmett Reed, the postmaster, and leading dealer in hardware, cutlery, arms and ammunition. Here, beside the mountain stream and among the moss-grown rocks, played the juvenile Reeds—little more than rushes in size watched over more or less carefully by Boadicea, aged twenty, eldest daughter of the house.

To these confines late one afternoon came Arizona Dan, worst man in the country, after breaking half a thousand

dollars' worth of mirrors and glassware in the principal places of entertainment, and introducing sundry slugs of lead into various citizens to their great bodily anguish. Dan was too drunk to entertain a wholesome fear of Rad Conrad, and it was his intention to conceal himself until darkness should lend him cover to escape.

On being apprised of these events the sheriff of the county, recognizing his duty, prepared to effect Dan's capture. A brave man in his place who properly estimated the value of a good citizen's life in comparison with the vital spark of a degenerate like Arizona Dan, as a furtherance of the survival of the fittest idea would have summoned a posse, and by moral force of numbers would have secured the surrender of the offender without risk of bloodshed. Radcliff Conrad was not the man to do this. He shunned all appearance of lack of courage, as he desired, in his heart, to shun the danger.

"What arms did he have?" asked the sheriff of some men who had seen Arizona Dan's retreat to the gulch.

"None," said a saloonkeeper, who had suffered from the fugitive's iconoclasm.

"He left both his guns in my place."

The sheriff unbuckled his revolver and shoved it across the counter.

"Keep that for me," he said. "I'll go and get Dan."

He passed slowly down the street, walking in the direction of the gulch, and the men gazed after him admiringly.

"Never knew what bein' afraid was, Rad never!" said the mail carrier.

"He 'uz born that a-way," said the country clerk. "He wouldn't take his gun along, cause Dan had left his Dan 'pears to me that's a leetle reckless. Dan overweighs Rad a matter of twenty-five pound, the very least."

In the gulch things were as usual, to all appearances. The little mountain brook that dashed down the steep rocks curled in the deep shade, and sent out diamond flashes where stray flecks of sunlight dived into it, and the birds in the redwood trees whistled away as though there was no such unharmonious and degraded thing as Arizona Dan somewhere below trying to conceal his desecrating presence. The little Reeds were at school, and such noises as might have been heard by that legendary and overworked creature, the casual observer, were sylvan and well attuned. A critic in sight-harmony would also have found little to cavil at, unless his too fine-drawn perceptions had deemed the aspect of Miss Boadicea Reed, who sat negligently in a grapevine swing, too unsylph-like for perfect accord.

Miss Boadicea-called "Dicey" by her immediate family and friends, a diminutive evolved from their original and arbitrary pronunciation of her name-sounded a note which may have been a dissonance, but it had its true power of accentuating the soft melody of the wood. As she half reclined upon the giant vine, her freshly-starched white muslin crackled about a form whose measurements faltered not an inch from the modern standard of perfection. Her glossy black hair was arranged in the latest fashion shown in the most recently arrived ladies' magazine in Lava Canyon. Her features were clear cut and regular; she had the eyes of Melpomene, and the heart of the ancient British queen whose name she bore.

Miss Boadicea Reed also had a secret. Being a woman, her dearest friends had often heard it divulged. But, as it was a secret, there needs must be those to whom it was not imparted. That portion of humanity was the one denominated by Miss Reed as 'the gentlemen.' This awful secret was that she had never, no, never, felt the slightest sensation of fear

or abashment at any person or thing since she could remember. Miss Boadicea despised all the little feminine weaknesses and terrors of her sex with all the prejudice of one who did not understand them. Had she been born with time and circumstances in her favour she would have led the overturning of a dynasty or two, captured by force the crown of social queendom, or at least have gone up in a balloon as the special female representative of one of the several greatest newspapers on earth. In the presence of man, the lord of creation, she felt no awe. Living in a frontier town and possessing the attractions she did, offers of marriage had come years before, but her suitors had never awakened in her a feeling softer than comradeship. She had laughed at most of them, pitched one out the window, and informed them all that they 'made her tired.' In fact, there was nothing in all creation, with or without life, that had ever caused her a qualm or a tremor. She regarded robbers as vulgar persons beneath notice, serpents, horned toads, mice and Gila monsters as uninteresting and unterrifying vermin too insignificant to dread. Her secret ambition, cherished in good faith until she was eighteen, had been to dress in man's clothes and travel around the world selling soap, or diamonds, or patent quartz crushers—anything would do. Since she was twenty her ideas had toned down to a firm resolve to be prima donna of an opera troupe, and the gulch had for many months echoed daily warblings that for clearness and volume, if not melodiousness, surpassed easily any voices in Lava Canyon. The form within the crinkling white muslin was a storage battery of impetuous life and force that needed continually some object upon which to exhaust its energy.

As Boadicea swung in the grape vine, some three hundred yards up the gulch from the house, she turned her gaze idly

toward a thick clump of bushes, and saw an eye with a good deal of red in the normally white portion of it looking at her between the leaves.

She sat bolt upright on the vine, and, as it appeared to be a man's eye, her hand, without any special volition of her brain, went to the knot of hair at the back of her head, smoothed it a little, and thrust in the pins more securely.

"Come out of there," she said.

Red-faced and heavy-eyed from drink, Arizona Dan, hitching up his revolverless belt, shuffled his huge form through the flexible branches of the bushes into the path.

"Sh-sh-sh!" he said, his heavy face folding into a dull smile intended to be reassuring,

"I ain't a-goin' to hurt you, miss."

"Hurt me!" said Miss Reed, contemptuously, "I should think not. What are you doing here?"

"Just a layin' 'low, miss, and waitin' for night. You see, I was on what you might call a sort of spree, and broke a glass or two. Maybe somebody was hurt, too. The whisky done it. A good lookin' young lady like you, miss, wouldn't give the word on a man, now, I bet a hoss."

Arizona Dan's lumbering attempt at compliment produced no effect. Boadicea regarded him sternly with unswerving disapproving eyes.

"You don't want to be loafing around these diggings," she said, substituting the local form of parlance for her ordinarily more elevated style of conversation, as being more worthy of her audience. "You are not afraid, are you?" she said with infinite disdain.

"I ain't afraid," said Arizona Dan, shifting his feet uneasily, "except of being took. I can't fight the whole town."

"Is any one after you?"

"If they ain't, they will be. Rad Conrad's in town, and" Arizona Dan broke off with an oath, and looked down the steep pathway.

"Here he comes now," he muttered.

Boadicea rose to her feet and peered over the tops of the intervening bushes. The sheriff, unarmed, in a light summer suit that set off to advantage his strong, graceful figure, was coming up the path with the sun striking golden lights from his head of curly blonde hair. Boadicea looked upon him and loved.

When in ten paces of his man the sheriff took off his hat and wiped his brow with a silk handkerchief.

"Dan," he said, in an even tone, "I want you."

Arizona Dan drew a nine-inch bowie knife from the leg of his boot. "Come and get me," he said, with a grin, and a suggestive upward movement of his right hand.

The old, well-known, nauseating, deathly, cowardly physical fear came upon the sheriff as he saw the shining blade held by the huge desperado he had come unarmed to capture. His pride and the wonderful moral puissance that ground out courageous deeds from heartsinking apprehension urged him forward another step. Arizona Dan laughed a low, half-sober, but chilling laugh. So quiet it was that the voice of the brook sounded in the sheriff's ears like the derisive mockery of men at his poltroonry.

For one instant Radcliff Conrad swung in the balance. An all-pervading panic seized him, and the foot he lifted to take a forward step weighed a hundred pounds. The rustling of a branch to his right, above the patch, drew from him a swift glance, and he looked for ten seconds into two dark eyes that seemed to flash some strange, exalting essence into his veins. A weight seemed loosened somewhere within him,

and he felt that he could hear it fall down, to unsounded depths. He looked at Arizona Dan laughed low and joyously, as a child does who has come upon a long-desired toy.

"Will you come?" said the sheriff in a tone a bridegroom might have used to his bride.

"I'll cut your heart out, Rad Conrad," said Arizona Dan, "if you come two steps nearer."

Boadicea, on the ledge above, rustled a little, and the sheriff, without looking up, smiled again. Arizona Dan held his knife as one holds a foil, point outward, with his thumb against the guard. The sheriff crouched some three inches like a cat, and seemed to gather himself together with his weight balanced evenly on each foot. Arizona Dan stood still with his knife ready. Was Rad Conrad fool enough to attack him with his bare hands?

The sheriff could have shouted for joy. Like a flash valor and audacious courage had come upon him. He felt that he would never know fear again. Something had passed into his blood that had made him a man instead of the spurious being he had been. He felt the two dark eyes above fixed upon him, but he kept his own upon Arizona Dan's.

Heretofore the sheriff's exploits had been attended by a fortuitous chance that brought him safely out of them—a chance just as blind and incomprehensible as that which guards the ways of children and drunkards. Now he felt the caution, the indomitable intent to do coupled with the prudence of the successful general that gives bravery its value. Half a miracle had been accomplished. The other half was to follow.

It must have been that Arizona Dan's nerves were unstrung by his debauch, else when a small stone dislodged by Boadicea's foot rattled down to the path at his side he would not have bestowed the advantage of turning his head quickly

to look. But he did so, and in the instant the sheriff had his knife arm by the wrist, and his other arm about his waist. Then Arizona Dan was filled with surprise to feel the arm that held his knife slowly twisting in spite of all his resistance—twisting outward, until the tendons and muscles were cracking. The sheriff's hand was like a steel clamp, and when the pain grew unbearable Arizona Dan dropped the knife. When the sheriff heard it ring on the rocks he released the wrist suddenly and laid his left forearm across Dan's throat. They were too close for blows, and there was little struggling or shifting of ground. The side for displacement won, and the gladiators went down with a crash. A small boulder in the way of Arizona Dan's head left him lying in a disgraceful heap oblivious to defeat. The sheriff knelt upon the vanquished distributor of leaden largess, drew cords from his pocket, and ignominiously bound him hand and foot. Then he sprang to his feet and turned his flushed face and yellow curls to the source of his new being, as a sunflower turns to the sun.

Boadicea slid down through the bushes like a young panther.

"You're a jim dandy," she said, "if there ever was one. I saw it. I . . ."

She stopped suddenly. The sheriff was looking straight into her eyes. She felt, for the first time, a strange heat in her cheeks, and thought she must have fever. Her eyes slowly dropped, for the first time, before another's. Her tongue for the first time tripped and faltered.

"It'll be dark soon," began the sheriff, and his voice sounded to her far away like the wind in the pines; "you'd better let me walk back to the house with you. I'll bring a horse back for this chap by the time he recovers. You are Miss Reed, I think. I know your father."

The evening breeze rustled airily through the redwoods. A squirrel frisked up a hickory, and the first owl hoot came from the shadows about the brook. The brook's babble no longer mocked; it sang a paean of praise. As they walked down the path together a scream of fright came from the namesake of the battle queen of the Britons.

"A horrid lizard!" she cried.

The sheriff's strong arm reassured her. The miracle was complete. The soul of each had passed into the other.

Unwanted

Rabindranath Tagore

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941) was a poet, novelist and educator. Rabindranath Tagore won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1913. Tagore was awarded knighthood in 1915, but he surrendered it in 1919 after the Jalianwala Bagh Massacre. He started an experimental school at Shantiniketan. Tagore was closely associated with the Indian National Movement and he gained inspiration from Gandhi.

Although Tagore wrote successfully in all literary genres, he was first of all a poet. Among his fifty odd volumes of poetry are *Manasi* (1890) [The Ideal One], *Sonar Tari* (1894) [The Golden Boat], *Gitanjali* (1910) [Song Offerings], *Gitimalya* (1914) [Wreath of Songs], and *Balaka* (1916) [The Flight of Cranes]. Tagore's major plays are *Raja* (1910) [The King of the Dark Chamber], *Dakghar* (1912) [The Post Office], *Achalayatan* (1912) [The Immovable], *Muktadhara* (1922) [The Waterfall], and *Raktakaravi* (1926) [Red Oleanders]. He is the author of several volumes of short stories and a number of novels, among them being *Gora* (1910), *Ghare-Baire* (1916) [The Home and the World], and *Yogayog* (1929) [Crosscurrents].

ABOUT THE STORY

'Unwanted' is a touching story of a young and poor Brahmin boy who is a castaway. He is given shelter by a rich family. His maturing emotionally and physically causes pain to him as well as the family.

Towards evening the storm grew steadily worse. What with the lashing of the rain, the claps of thunder and flashes of lightning, it was like war between gods and demons in the sky. Great black clouds rolled hither and thither like banners proclaiming world-destruction; rebellious waves danced across the river, crashing on the shore; huge trees in the garden groaned as their branches heaved and thrashed to right and left.

Meanwhile in a bungalow in Chandernagore, in a shuttered room lit only by an oil-lamp, a husband and wife sat on bedding spread out on the floor by a bed and talked.

"In a little while," Sharat Babu was saying, "you'll be quite recovered, and we can go back home."

"I'm better already," said Kiranmayi. "It won't hurt me to go home now."

Any married person will know that the conversation was not actually so brief. The question was simple, but the argument to and fro fell short of a solution. It spun faster and faster like a boat without oars, till it seemed in danger of sinking in floods of tears.

"Does the doctor know everything?" said Kiran.

"You must know," said Sharat, "that this is the season back home in which it's easy to catch infections. You should wait for another month or so."

"Are you saying there are no infections here?" Said Kiran.

What had happened was this. Kiran was loved by everyone in the household, even by her mother-in-law. When she fell badly ill, they were all alarmed; and when the doctor advised a change of air, her husband and mother-in-law were pleased to take her, gladly abandoning work and household. Village soothsayers questioned whether recovery would necessarily arise from the change: wasn't it rather modish and excessive

to make such a fuss about a young wife — as if no one else's wife got ill sometimes, or people were immortal in Chandernagore? Was there any place where the prescriptions of Fate did not apply? But Sharat and his mother paid no heed. The life of their darling Kiranmayi was more important than the collective wisdom of the village. When a loved one is threatened, people are often irrational.

Sharat took a bungalow in Chandernagore, and Kiran recovered from her illness: she was just still rather weak. There was a touching feebleness in her face and eyes, so that anyone looking at her felt, with quaking heart, that she'd had a most narrow escape.

But Kiran was jolly by nature, gregarious. She didn't like being alone in this place. She had nothing to do in the house, no neighbours or friends; simply nurturing her health all day bored her to death. The dose of medicine every hour, the watching of her temperature and diet — it was all very irksome. This was why husband and wife were quarrelling in a shuttered room this stormy night.

So long as Kiran came up with replies, the argument proceeded equally; but in the end she resorted to silence. She sat with her head bowed and her face turned away from Sharat, who now found himself weak and weaponless. He was just about to give up the fight, when the bearer was heard loudly calling from outside. Sharat opened the door. He was told that a young Brahmin boy had been shipwrecked — he'd swum ashore to their garden. Kiran's anger and misery disappeared when she heard this, and at once she sent some dry clothes from the almirah. In no time she had warmed a pan of milk and called for the boy to come in.

He had long hair, large round eyes, and no sign of a moustache. Kiran sat with him as he ate, and asked him

about himself. She heard that he belonged to a band of travelling players, and his name was Nilkanta. They'd been engaged to perform at the Sinhas' house near by, but had been shipwrecked, and who knew what had happened to the others in the troupe? The boy was a good swimmer, so he'd saved himself. Here he was! Kiran felt a surge of tenderness towards him as she realized how easily he could have died.

'This will be a good thing,' thought Sharat to himself. 'Kiran has something new to do—it will keep her going for a while.' His mother, too, welcomed the merit to be gained from caring for a Brahmin boy; and Nilkanta himself was pleased to escape from death and his former master into the arms of this rich family.

Before very long, Sharat and his mother began to change their minds. They felt that the boy had stayed long enough—there'd be trouble if they didn't get rid of him soon. Nilkanta had begun to smoke Sharat's hookah in secret, puffing away grandly. On rainy days he would shamelessly take Sharat's favourite silk umbrella and strut around the village making new friends. A dirty stray dog he had petted brazenly frequented Sharat's finely furnished room, leaving pawprints on the spotless floor-cover to record its gracious visits. A large circle of young admirers formed round Nilkanta, and the village mangoes were given no chance to ripen that year.

Kiran was far too lavish with the boy—there was no doubt of that. Her husband and mother-in-law often took her to task for this, but she ignored them. She decked him out like a baby, giving him Sharat's old shirts and socks, and new shoes, dhoti and chadar. She would call him at whim, to satisfy her need to show affection as well as her sense of fun. She would sit smiling on the bed, pan-box beside her, with a maidservant combing and drying her long wet hair, while

Nilkanta acted with flamboyant gestures the story of Nala and Damayanti. This way, the long afternoon passed quickly. She tried to get Sharat to come and watch the performance, but this annoyed him, and in any case in front of Sharat Nilkanta's talent failed to shine. Sometimes Kiran's mother-in-law came, attracted by the gods in the story; but her customary afternoon sleepiness soon defeated her piety—she would end up lying on her back.

Nilkanta was often subjected to cuffs and boxes on the ear from Sharat, but used as he was from birth to even harsher methods of discipline he didn't feel either hurt or dishonoured. He firmly believed that just as the world was divided between sea and land, so human life was divided between food and beatings—and beatings were the larger part of it.

It was difficult to tell exactly how old he was. If he was fourteen or fifteen, one would say his face had matured beyond his years; if he was seventeen or eighteen, one would call him underdeveloped. He was younger than he looked, or else he looked younger than he was. Because he had joined the troupe of players at an early age, he acted Radha, Damayanti, Sita, and "Vidya's confidante." The needs of his master and the will of God coincided, and his growth stopped. Everyone thought of him as small, and he thought of himself as small: he was never treated as befitted his true age. Through such causes natural and unnatural, by the time he was seventeen, he looked more like an overdeveloped fourteen-years-old than an underdeveloped seventeen-years old. His lack of moustache added to this false impression. Whether from smoking tobacco, or from using language ill-suited to his years, his lips had an adult curl to them; but his eyes, with their large pupils, were simple and childish. One could say that inside he was a

child, but his yatra-life had made him adult on the surface.

Nature's relentless laws, however, worked on him as he stayed on in Sharat Babu's Chandernagore bungalow. Held back at the threshold for so long, he quietly crossed it at last. His seventeen or eighteen years of growth attained their proper ripeness.

The change was not evident from the outside, but it was there in the way Nilkanta felt hurt and embarrassed when Kiran continued to treat him like a boy. One day she frivolously asked him to dress as a female sakhi: her request was suddenly awkward for him, though he couldn't see why it was so. These days, if she asked him to imitate a yatra-performance, he would run from her sight. He was no longer willing to think of himself as a juvenile member of a sordid yatra-troupe. He had even made up his mind to try to learn to read and write with the manager of the bungalow. But because Nilkanta was Kiran's pet, the manager couldn't stand; and so unaccustomed was he to concentrated study that the letters swam before his eyes. He would sit for hours on the river-bank leaning against a champak tree, with a book open on his lap: the water gurgled gently, boats floated past, fidgety birds on the branches made their irrelevant chirping comments, and Nilkanta kept his eyes on the book—but what he was thinking he alone knew, or maybe he didn't. He could hardly move from one sentence to another, but he liked to feel he was reading a book. Whenever a boat passed, he would hold up the book impressively, mutter, and make a great show of reading; but as soon as the spectators had gone, his enthusiasm waned again.

Formerly he sang yatra-songs mechanically; but now their melodies caused a strange disturbance in his mind. The words were utterly trivial, full of meretricious wordplay: their meaning

was impenetrable—but when he sang,

O swan, swan, Brahmin twice born,

Why are you so heartless?

Say for what good, in this wild wood,

Do you threaten the life of a princess?

He was suddenly now transported to a different life and world. The familiar scene around him and his insignificant life were transformed into song, took on a new appearance. The swan and the princess created extraordinary pictures in his mind: who he thought he was he couldn't exactly say, but he forgot he was an orphan boy from a yatra-troupe. Just as a miserable grubby child in a wretched hovel somewhere listens at night to the story of 'The Prince, the Princess and the Ruby', and in the dimly lit darkness of his dingy home is released from deprivation, finding in a fairy-tale world in which anything is possible — a new beauty, a brighter aspect, a matchless power; so this yatra-boy was able to see, through the tunes of these songs, both himself and his world in a new light. The sound of the water, the rustling of leaves, the call of birds, the smiling face of the kind woman who had given this friendless boy her protection, her loving bangle-laden arms, her precious beautiful lotus-pink feet—all were transformed into music by who knows what miraculous magic! But another time this musical mirage was swept away: the yatra-boy with his long shaggy hair was rediscovered, and Sharat—informed by the owner of a mango-orchard was upon him, thwacking him with slaps on his cheeks; and Nilkanta would flee to his band of devoted followers to seek new excitement on land or in water or the branches of trees.

Meanwhile Sharat's brother Satish had come to stay in the house for his Calcutta college-holiday. Kiran was delighted—now she had something new to occupy her. He was equal to

her in age: in her dress, manners, or in serving him at meals she teased him at every turn. Sometimes she smeared her palms with vermilion and pressed them over his eyes; sometimes she wrote 'monkey' on the back of his shirt; sometimes she bolted his door from outside and ran off merrily. Satish was not a man to be outdone: he would get his own back by stealing her keys, putting chillies in her pan, or slyly tying the end of her sari to her bed. Thus they spent the day teasing and chasing and laughing—or quarrelling, weeping, entreating and then making up again.

Something got into Nilkanta now. He could not think of a reason for quarrelling with anyone, yet was full of bitterness and unease. He began to be needlessly nasty to the boys who followed him around; he gave his pet dog undeserved kicks, so that it yelped noisily; he violently slashed at weeds with a stick as he walked along.

Kiran loved to see people eat well, to sit and serve them with their food. Nilkanta was a good eater: it was not hard to get him to take more and more of whatever he liked. So Kiran would often call him to serve him herself—it gave her special pleasure to watch him enjoying his food. But now that Satish was here, Kiran often did not have time to sit with Nilkanta as he ate. Formerly his appetite had not been affected by her absence: he would even raise the milk-pan and drink the water. But now if she didn't call him he was sick at heart and felt a bitter taste in his mouth: he would rise without finishing, telling the maid in a husky voice that he wasn't hungry. He hoped that Kiran would send for him if she heard about this, entreat him to take some food; he resolved that he would not give in, would go on saying he wasn't hungry. But no one told her, and she didn't send for him: the maidservant finished up the food that was left. He would

then turn out the lamp in his room, throw himself down on the dark bed, sobbing and choking and pressing his face into the pillow. But what use was this? Who took any notice? Who came to give him comfort? Eventually sleep—kindest of nurses—came with her gentle touch to bring relief to this sad, motherless boy.

Nilkanta was convinced that Satish was running him down before Kiran. On days when she was silent for no reason, he was sure she was angry with him because of something that Satish had said. He often now prayed to the gods fiercely, 'May I be Satish in another life, and may Satish be me.' He knew that a curse delivered by a Brahmin with full concentration never failed, and he therefore as good as burnt himself with passion as he put the fire of Brahma on to Satish, while peals of merry laughter—Satish's laugh mixed with Kiran's—came down from the room above.

Nilkanta did not dare to come out in open enmity with Satish, but took every opportunity to cause him minor inconveniences. If Satish left his soap on the steps down to the Ganges while he went for a dip, Nilkanta would swoop and run off with it, so that when Satish returned it was no longer there. Once when swimming he suddenly saw his best embroidered shirt floating away: he assumed it had flown in the wind, but there didn't seem to be any wind blowing.

One day Kiran, wanting to entertain Satish, called Nilkanta and asked him to sing some yatra-songs. Nilkanta made no reply. Surprised, she asked what had happened. Again Nilkanta was silent. She asked once more. "I've forgotten them," he said, and went out.

At last it was time for Kiran to return home. Everyone started to get ready: Satish too was to go back with them. But no one said anything to Nilkanta. No one seemed even to

consider whether he would go or stay. Kiran eventually proposed to take him; but when her mother-in-law, husband and brother-in-law objected with one voice, Kiran too abandoned her resolve. Finally two days before they were due to leave, she called the boy and gently advised him to return to his village.

To hear her speak tenderly to him again after such long neglect was too much for Nilkanta, and he burst out crying. Kiran's eyes, too, filled with tears. She realized with great distress how wrong she had been temporarily to encourage affection in a person she would have to leave.

Satish was near by at the time. Infuriated by the sight of a grown boy weeping, he snapped, 'Good God! At the drop of a hat, overcome with snivelling!' Kiran rebuked him for this heartless remark. "You don't understand, Baudi," said Satish. "You believe in everyone too much. You knew nothing about him, yet you let him live here like a king. He's frightened of being small fry again—that's why he's making such a scene. He knows that a couple of tears will sway you."

Nilkanta rushed out of the room. In his mind he was stabbing an image of Satish with a knife, piercing him with needles, setting him on fire. Satish's actual body remained unscathed: the only blood that flowed was from Nilkanta's heart.

Satish had brought from Calcutta a fancy inkstand he had purchased, with two shell-boats on either side to hold the ink, and a German silver swan in the middle with its wings spread and beak open to hold the pens. Satish prized this greatly; he would even sometimes polish it carefully with a silk handkerchief. Kiran would often jokingly tap the swan's beak with the finger and sing,

O swan, swan, Brahmin twice born,

Why are you so heartless?

And joking arguments would follow between her and her brother-in-law about it.

The morning before their departure, Satish could not find the inkstand. Kiran laughed and said, "Your swan has flown away to search for your Damayanti! But Satish was incensed. He was certain that Nilkanta had stolen the thing—he could even find witnesses who had seen him loitering near Satish's room the previous night. The accused was brought before Satish. Kiran was present too. Satish asked straight out, 'Where have you put the inkstand that you stole from me? Give it back!'"

Nilkanta had often received beatings from Sharat for various offences and also for no offences, and had borne them all stoically. But when the theft of the inkstand was ascribed to him in front of Kiran, his large eyes burnt like fire, his chest heaved and choked his throat, and if Satish had said one more word the boy would have pounced like a furious kitten and gouged him with all ten fingernails.

Kiran called him into the next room and asked him in kind, soft tones, "Nilu, if you have that inkstand, give it to me quietly and no one will say anything to you." Heavy tears welled from his eyes: he covered his face with his hands and wept. Kiran came out of the room and said, "Nilkanta did not steal your inkstand."

Sharat and Satish both insisted, "No one but him could have stolen it."

"It wasn't him," said Kiran firmly.

Sharat wanted to fetch Nilkanta to interrogate him, but Kiran said, "No. I forbid you to ask him anything about the theft."

"We should search his room and his box," said Satish.

"If you do that," said Kiran, "I shall have nothing more to do with you. You shouldn't cast suspicion on the innocent."

As she spoke, tears collected in her eyelids. The appeal of those tears in her sad eyes ensured that no further action was taken against Nilkanta. But the unjust treatment of an innocent orphan boy sent a surge of sympathy through Kiran's heart. That evening she entered Nilkanta's room with a fine matching dhoti and chadar, two shirts, a pair of new shoes and a ten-rupee note. Her plan was to put these loving gifts inside his box without telling him. The tin box too had been given by her. Taking her bunch of keys from the end of her sari, she quietly opened the box. But she couldn't fit her presents into it. Cotton-reels, bamboo-twigs, polished shells for cutting green mangoes, the bottoms of broken glasses, and various similar articles were heaped inside it. She decided that if she carefully rearranged these things, everything would go in. She began to empty the box. First of all the cotton-reels, spinning-tops and knives came out; then some clean and dirty clothes, and then, right at the bottom, Satish's precious swan inkstand.

Amazed and flushed, Kiran sat pondering for a long time with the inkstand in her hand. When Nilkanta came into the room from behind her, she never even noticed. He saw everything; realized that Kiran had herself come like a thief to confirm his thieving, and that he had been caught. But how could he explain that he had not stolen like a common thief out of greed, that he'd done it in retaliation, that he'd meant to throw the thing into the river, and only in a moment of weakness had he not thrown it away but had buried it in his box? He was not a thief, he was not a thief! But then what was he? How could he say what he was? He had stolen something but he was not a thief! The fact that Kiran had suspected him—it was the cruel injustice of this that he would

never be able to explain, never be able to bear.

With a long sigh, Kiran put the inkstand back into the box. Like a thief herself, she pressed the dirty clothes on top of it, then those boyish things — cotton-reels, twigs, spinning-tops, shells, pieces of glass; then she arranged her presents and the ten-rupee note.

The next day there was no sign of the Brahmin boy. The villagers said they had not seen him; the police said he was missing. "We must look at his box now," said Sharat.

"Not on any account," said Kiran adamantly.

Later, she fetched the box into her own room, took out the inkstand and secretly threw it into the Ganges.

Sharat and his family went home; the house and garden lay empty. Only Nilkanta's village dog remained. It wandered along by the river, forgetting to eat, searching, searching and howling.

The Garden Party

Katherine Mansfield

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Katherine Mansfield was born in 1888 in Wellington, New Zealand. She moved to London in 1903 and studied at the Queen's College, where she joined the staff of the college magazine. She soon became known for her independent spirit, her brilliant memory and her creative and original mind. She returned to New Zealand in 1906 and took up music. She found Wellington painfully provincial. Finally, her father accepted her plea for musical training in England and she arrived again in London in August, 1908.

She went through a series of heartbreaks in her relationships and most of her life was burdened with loneliness, illness and alienation. In her last years Mansfield spent a lot of time in southern France and in Switzerland, seeking relief from tuberculosis. Mansfield died on January 9, 1923, at the age of 34. Her writing has often been compared to that of Anton Chekhov's. Some of Mansfield's best-known works include *In a German Pension*, *Prelude*, *Bliss and Other Stories*, *The Dove's Nest and Other Stories*, *Something Childish and Other Stories*, *The Journal of Katherine Mansfield*, and *The Letters of Katherine Mansfield*.

ABOUT THE STORY

Katherine Mansfield in 'The Garden Party' has shown great delicacy of feeling and realism. She mirrors the class differences existing in those days. Mansfield's sympathetic attitude towards the unfortunate and the poor, is revealed through Laura.

And after all, the weather was perfect—simply perfect for their garden party. It was windless and warm, and there was not a single cloud in the sky. The gardener had been up since dawn, mowing and sweeping the lawns so that the grass seemed to shine. As for the roses, hundreds, really hundreds, had come out during the night.

They were having their breakfast when the men came to put up the marquee.

"Where do you want the marquee put, mother?"

"Don't ask me. I'm leaving everything to you girls this year. Forget that I'm your mother and treat me as a guest."

Meg could not possibly go out to the men. She had washed her hair before breakfast and was now drinking her coffee with a towel wrapped round her head. Jose, as usual, was sitting at the breakfast table in a silk slip and a kimono. Laura had to go to tell the men what to do.

Laura ran out of the room still holding her piece of bread and butter. She saw four workmen, in their shirt-sleeves, standing on the garden path. They carried poles and rolls of canvas and had big tool-bags on their backs. Suddenly she felt shy. She wished that she was not holding that piece of bread and butter but there was nowhere to put it and she could not throw it away.

She blushed and tried to look very serious and grown-up.

"Good morning," she said, copying her mother's voice. But that sounded wrong and she stammered like a little girl. "Oh . . . er . . . have you come . . . is it about the marquee?"

"That's right, miss," said the tallest of the men, pushing back his straw hat and smiling down at her. "That's it." The others smiled at her, too, and their smiles seemed to say, "Cheer up. We shan't bite." Laura lost her shyness and thought, "How nice workmen are! and, oh, what a lovely

morning!" But she had to tell the men where to put the marquee.

"What about the lawn where the lily-pond is? Would that do?"

She pointed to the lily-lawn with the hand that did not hold her bread and butter. The men looked and the tall one frowned.

"I don't think it would," he said. "You see, miss, with a thing like a marquee, you want to put it somewhere where it'll hit you straight in the eye, if you follow me."

Laura did indeed follow him but she was not quite sure that his language was respectful enough.

"What about a corner of the tennis-court?" she suggested.

"But the band's going to be in one corner."

"Going to have a band, are you?" said another of the men, and he looked over the tennis-court thoughtfully. What was he thinking?

"Only a very small band," said Laura gently.

Then the tall fellow said, "Look there, miss, that's the place. Over there, against those trees. That'll do fine."

"Oh dear," thought Laura, "those lovely trees! Must they be hidden by a marquee?"

They must. The men had already picked up their poles and were walking towards the place. Only the tall fellow was left. He bent down, pressed some leaves of lavender between his fingers and breathed in the sweet smell. When Laura saw that, she forgot about the trees. She was filled with wonder to see that he cared for things like that. "Oh, how very nice workmen are!" she thought again. "Why can't I have workmen for friends instead of the silly boys I dance with and who come to supper on Sunday nights? I really feel quite happy in the company of workmen."

Then she decided that it was the fault of the stupid idea of class differences. Well, for her, there were no class differences. None.

The workmen were busily hammering now. Someone was whistling. A cheerful voice called out, "You all right, mate?" what friendliness! What . . . Laura could not find the word she wanted but she felt happy and took a big bite of her bread and butter.

"Laura! Where are you? Telephone, Laura!" a voice cried from the house.

"Coming." And away she flew, over the lawn, up the path, up the steps, across the veranda and into the porch. In the hall, her father and her brother Laurie were just brushing their hats, ready to go to the office.

"I say, Laura," said Laurie, "would you have a look at my coat. See if it wants pressing."

"I will," she promised, then she suddenly threw her arms round him, laughed and said, "Oh, I do love parties, don't you?"

Laurie laughed. "Yes, I do," he said. He gave her a gentle push.

"They're waiting for you on the phone, old girl."

Laura picked up the receiver. "Yes. Yes. Oh, Kitty? Good morning, dear. Come to lunch? Do. We'd be delighted. It'll be only sandwich crusts and what's left over. I know you won't mind. Yes, isn't it as perfect morning? Your white dress? Oh, yes, I certainly should. One moment, hold the line. Mother's calling me." Then Laura called up to her mother, "What, mother? Can't hear." Mrs Sheridan's voice came floating down the stairs, "Tell her to wear that sweet hat she had on last Sunday." Laura went on with her talk to Kitty. "Mother says that you simply must wear that sweet hat

you had on last Sunday. Good. One o'clock then. Bye."

Laura put back the receiver, stretched her arms wide and laughed. Then she stood quite still, listening. The house was full of sound and movement: Quick steps, voices, doors opening and shutting and, upstairs, the piano was being pushed along. But the air! Was it always like this? Gentle breezes were playing a game – in at the windows and out at the doors. And everywhere there were darling little spots of sunshine. She felt like kissing them.

The front door bell rang and Sadie's heavy footsteps shouted on the stairs. A man's voice said something and Sadie answered, "I'm sure I don't know. Wait, I'll ask Mrs Sheridan." Laura went into the hall. "What is it, Sadie?" she asked. "It's the man from the florist's, Miss Laura."

It was indeed. He was there at the door with pots and pots of the most lovely pink and red lilies. "Oh. Sadie!" cried Laura and bent down as if to warm herself at that fire of flowers. Then she said, "There must be a mistake. Nobody ordered all these, I'm sure. Sadie, go and find mother." But at that moment, Mrs Sheridan came towards them. "It's quite right," she said, "I ordered them. Aren't they lovely? I was passing the shop yesterday and I saw them in the window. I said to myself, 'For once in my life, I'm going to have all the lilies I want. The garden party will be a good excuse.' Oh, aren't they beautiful!"

The man brought more and more pots from his truck. "Put them just inside the door, on both sides of the porch, please," ordered Mrs Sheridan. "They'll look nice there, won't they, Laura?"

"Oh, they will!"

In the drawing-room, Meg, Jose and the gardener's boy had at last succeeded in moving the piano and arranging the

furniture. Jose asked the boy to tell her mother and Laura to come at once. Then she turned to Meg. "I want to see if the piano is all right," she said. "They may ask me to sing this afternoon. Let's try 'This Life is Weary', shall we?"

Pom! Tata-ta Tee-ta! The piano burst out mournfully. Jose's face became very sad and she clasped her hands to her heart. She gave a despairing look at her mother and Laura as they came in, and sang:

"This life is weary,
A tear – a sigh
A love that changes.
This life is weary.
A tear – a sigh
A love that changes.
And then – Goodbye"

She was going on to the second verse when Sadie came in. "Please, ma'am, cook's asking if you've got the flags for the sandwiches."

"The flags for the sandwiches, Sadie?" said Mrs Sheridan and her face showed that she had forgotten all about them. "Let me see. Tell cook I'll let her have them in ten minutes." She turned to Laura. "Come with me to the smoking-room. I've got the names somewhere on the back of an envelope. You'll have to write them out for me." Then she went on, "Meg, you go upstairs and take that wet thing off your head. Jose, go and get dressed. Do you hear me or shall I have to tell your father when he comes home? And – and, Jose, the cook's in a bad temper. Try and cheer her up if you go in the kitchen, will you? I daren't go near her when she's like this."

The envelope was found at last, behind the clock in the dining-room. Mrs Sheridan could not think how it had got

there.

"Well, Laura, cream-cheese and cucumber. Have you written that down?"

"Yes, mother."

"Egg and . . ." Mrs Sheridan looked hard at the envelope. "What's this? It looks like mice. It can't be mice. Surely?"

"Olives, mother," said Laura.

"Yes, of course. What a horrible mixture! Egg and olives!"

The flags were finished at last and Laura took them to the kitchen. There she found Jose talking to the cook who was all smiles.

"I've never seen such delicious sandwiches," Jose was saying. "How many kinds did you say there were, cook?"

"Fifteen, Miss Jose."

"Well, cook, I congratulate you."

Cook collected the crusts with the long sandwich-knife and beamed all over her face.

"Godber's man has come," Sadie announced, coming out of the pantry. She had seen him pass by the pantry window. That meant that the cream-puffs had come. Godber's were famous for their cream-puffs. "Bring them in and put them on the table, my girl," cook ordered Sadie. The cream-puffs looked delicious, so light and feathery. Jose and Laura looked at them.

"Take one, my dears," cook said. "Your mother won't know."

"It's too soon after breakfast," they said. But in two minutes' time they were both licking the cream off their fingers.

"Let's go into the garden, out by the back way," suggested Laura. "I'd like to see how the men are getting on with the marquee. They're such awfully nice men." But they found the

back door blocked by cook, Sadie, the gardener's boy and Godber's man.

Something had happened.

Cook was shaking her head sorrowfully. Sadie was crying. The boy's face was grave. Godber's man was doing the talking and seemed to be enjoying it.

"What's the matter? What's happened?"

"There's been a terrible accident," said cook. "A man's been killed."

"A man killed! Where? How? When?"

Godber's man told the story. "Know those little houses just below here, miss?" Know them? Of course, she knew them. "Well, there's a young fellow living there, name of Scott, a Carter he is.

Well, his horse had a fright at a lorry at the corner of Hawke street it was—and he was thrown out of his cart, on the back of his head, miss. Killed."

"Dead!" Laura stared at Godber's man.

"Dead when they picked him up. I passed them when I was coming up here. They were just taking the body home." He looked at her coolly. "He's left a wife and five little children."

"Jose, come here." Laura caught hold of her sister's arm and pulled her through the kitchen door. "Jose, this is awful. However are we going to stop everything?"

"Stop everything, Laura!" Jose cried in astonishment. "What do you mean?"

"Stop the garden party, of course,"

Jose was even more astonished. "Stop the garden party? My dear Laura, have you gone off your head? Of course we can't stop the party. Nobody expects us to. Don't be so silly."

"But we can't have a garden party with a man dead just

outside the front gate."

Laura was not quite exact when she said that. The little house where the man had lived was in a lane right at the bottom of the hill, and you had to cross a wide road to get to it. All the houses in the lane were tiny, dirty, miserable and ugly. Mrs Sheridan always said that they had no right to be in that neighbourhood. They had small patches of garden-ground where there was nothing but cabbage-stalks, sickly hens and tomato tins. Washerwomen lived in the lane, chimney sweepers, a cobbler and a man who had a lot of bird-cages hanging in front of his house. There were swarms of dirty, ragged little children. Now that she was grown-up, Laura sometimes walked through the lane with her brother. It was a horrible place and they were always glad to get out of it. However, they felt that they must go everywhere and see everything, and so they went there.

"That poor woman!" said Laura, "How will she feel when she hears our band playing!"

"Laura," said Jose who was now losing her patience, "If you're going to stop a band playing every time there's an accident, you're going to be very busy. I'm just as sorry as you are . . ." Her eyes grew hard. "You won't bring a drunken workman back to life by being so soft-hearted," she said.

"Drunk!" cried Laura in a fury. "Who said he was drunk?"

Then she said, as she always said after a quarrel with her sister, "I'm going straight upstairs and tell mother."

Mrs Sheridan was sitting at her dressing-table, trying on a new hat.

"Why, Laura, what's the matter?" she said. "What's given you such a colour?"

"Mother, a man's been killed."

"Not in our garden?" Mrs Sheridan asked in alarm.

"No, no."

"Oh, what a shock you gave me!" Mrs Sheridan gave a great sigh of relief. She took off the hat she had been trying on and held it on her lap.

"Listen, mother," Laura said and then she told her the dreadful story. "Of course, we can't have our party. Can we?" she begged. "The band—and all those guests—They'd hear us, mother. They live so near."

Mrs Sheridan answered just as Jose had done. "My dear Laura, don't be so silly. It's only by chance that we've heard about it. If we hadn't heard we'd be having our party and enjoying it, shouldn't we?"

"Yes," said Laura, feeling that it was all wrong. She sat down on the couch. "Mother, isn't it really heartless of us?" she asked.

"Darling!" Mrs Sheridan got up and came up to her, carrying the hat. Before Laura could stop her, she had placed it in her head. "My dear," said her mother, "The hat is yours. It's just made for you. It's much too young for me. I've never seen you look so nice. Take a look at yourself." And she held up her hand-mirror.

But Laura would not look at herself. She turned her head away.

"You're being very silly, Laura," her mother said angrily.

"People like that don't expect sympathy from us. And it's not very nice of you to spoil our fun as you are doing now."

"I just don't understand," said Laura and she went to her own bedroom.

There, quite by chance, the first thing she saw was this charming girl in the mirror, in her black hat trimmed with golden flowers, and a long black velvet ribbon. Never had she looked so pretty. "Is mother right?" she thought and she

hoped that she was. "Perhaps I am being silly." Then into her mind came the picture of that poor woman, her little children, and the body being carried into the house. But now it did not seem real. "I'll think about it when the party's over," She decided. That seemed the best plan.

Lunch was over by half-past two and they were ready for their guests. The green-coated bandsmen had arrived and were seated in a corner of the tennis-court. "My dear," laughed Kitty who was Laura's best friend, "aren't they just like frogs? You ought to have arranged them round the pond with the conductor in the middle, sitting on a lily leaf."

Laurie came home and Laura stopped him as he was going upstairs. She wanted to tell him about the accident. If Laurie agreed with the others, then it was all right.

"Laurie!"

"Hallo!" He turned round and opened his eyes wide. "Laura, you look just wonderful. I say, what a splendid hat!"

"Is it?" Laura said faintly. She smiled up at her brother and didn't tell him after all.

The guests came streaming in. The band began to play. The hired waiters ran from the house to the marquee. There were people everywhere, walking down the paths and over the lawns, bending over the flowers, talking and laughing. They were like bright birds that had alighted in the Sheridans' garden for this one afternoon, on their way to . . . where? Ah, what happiness it is to be with people who are happy! And what pleasant things they had to say:

"Darling Laura, how lonely you're looking!"

"What a perfectly lovely hat, my dear!"

"Laura you look quite Spanish. I've never seen you looking so charming."

And Laura went about happily, asking, "Have you had tea?"

"Won't you have an ice?" She ran to her father, "Daddy darling, can't the band have something to drink?"

And then it was time for the guests to go home: "Never a more delightful party . . ." "The greatest success . . ." "Quite the most . . ."

Laura helped her mother with the goodbyes, standing at her side in the porch till it was all over.

"All over, all over, thank heavens!" said Mrs Sheridan. "Laura, go and find the others and let's all have some good strong coffee. I'm exhausted. Yes, it's been very successful. But oh, these parties, these parties!" And they all sat down in the empty marquee.

Mr Sheridan took a sandwich. "There was a terrible accident this morning," he said. "I suppose you didn't hear about it?"

"My dear, we did, and Laura wanted us to put the party off, silly girl!"

"It was pretty dreadful," said Mr Sheridan. "The fellow lived in the lane, just below us. He leaves a wife and half a dozen children, they say." He took another sandwich.

There was an uncomfortable silence. Then Mrs Sheridan had a bright idea. "Let's send the poor woman some of this good food that's been left over. It'll be a treat for the children, and she'll have something to offer the neighbours when they call." She jumped up. "Laura, get me that big basket."

"Mother do you really think it's a good idea?" asked Laura.

"Of course it is! What's the matter with you today? A little while ago you were saying that we were heartless, and now...."

"Oh, well!" Laura brought the basket and her mother filled it with good things.

"Take it yourself, darling. Go just as you are. No, wait.

Take some of those white lilies. People of that class love them."

"The stems will spoil her dress," said Jose.

"So they will. Only the basket then. Run along."

It was growing dark when Laura shut the garden gate. She walked slowly and thoughtfully down the hill. How quiet everything was! And she was on her way to a house where a man lay dead! It seemed so unreal. She looked up at the darkening sky and all she could think was, "Yes, it was a most successful party."

She crossed the wide road and entered the dark and smoky lane. Women in shawls and men in caps hurried by her, men hung over the fences, children played noisily in the doorways and everywhere there was rubbish and the smell of rubbish. Laura bent her head and passed on. She wished she had put on a coat. How her dress shone! And her hat with the velvet ribbon! Oh, why hadn't she taken it off! Everyone was staring at her. She shouldn't have come. Should she turn and go back?

It was too late. This was the house. It must be. A group of people were standing outside it. They stopped talking as Laura came nearer and parted to make way for her. Laura felt afraid.

"Is this Mrs Scott's house?" she asked timidly.

"It is," a woman told her.

Laura knocked at the door, thinking, "I'll just leave the basket and go."

The door opened and a little woman in black stood in the doorway.

"Are you Mrs Scott?"

"Walk in, please, miss," the woman said and Laura found herself in a dark passage.

"I only want to leave this basket, Mother sent . . ."

The woman seemed not to have heard her. "Come this way, please, miss," she said and Laura followed her.

She found herself in a tiny kitchen dimly lighted by a smoky lamp. There was a woman sitting near the low fire.

"Em," said the little woman. "Em, can you hear me? There's a young lady come to see you." She turned to Laura. "I'm her sister, miss. You'll excuse 'er, won't you?"

"Of course," replied Laura, "Please, please, don't bother her. I . . . I . . . I only wanted to leave . . ."

The woman by the fire turned round. Her face was all red and swollen and it looked terrible. She did not seem to understand anything. Why was the stranger there? What was the matter? She turned her face away.

"It's all right, my dear," her sister told her. "I'll thank the young lady." And to Laura she said again, "You'll excuse 'er, miss, I'm sure."

"Yes, yes," said Laura, feeling she must get away. She was back in the passage. Then a door opened and she walked straight through into the bedroom where the dead man was lying.

"You'd like to 'ave a look at him, wouldn't you, miss?" said Em's sister. "Don't be afraid, miss," she said as she pulled down the sheet. "There's nothing to be afraid of. 'E looks a picture, 'e does. Come along, my dear."

Laura came to the bed.

There lay a young man, fast asleep. He was sleeping so deeply that he was far, far away. And oh, how peacefully he slept! He was dreaming. Oh, never wake him up again! What did garden parties and baskets and pretty clothes matter to him? He was far away from all those things. He was wonderful, beautiful. While they had been laughing, while the band had

been playing, this wonderful thing had been playing, this wonderful thing had happened. Happy . . . happy. "All is well," said that sleeping face. "I am resting in perfect peace."

All the same, you had to cry and Laura felt that she could not leave him without saying one word to him. She gave a loud sob, like a child, and said, "Please, don't mind my hat."

She did not wait for Em's sister but made her way out of the house, down the path and past all those people standing outside. At the corner of the lane she found Laurie waiting for her.

"Is that you, Laura?"

"Yes, Laurie."

"Mother was getting anxious. Was it all right?"

"Yes, quite. Oh, Laurie!" She took his arm and pressed up close against him.

"I say, you're not crying, are you, old girl?"

Laura shook her head, but she was crying.

Laurie put his arm round her shoulder. "You mustn't cry," he said. "Was it awful?"

"No," sobbed Laura, "it was wonderful But, Laurie . . ."

She stopped and looked at her brother. "Isn't life," she stammered,

"Isn't life . . . ?" But what life was she could not explain. It did not matter. Laurie understood.

"Isn't it, darling?" he said.

The Dowry

Guy De Maupassant

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Guy de Maupassant was born in France in 1850. His father belonged to a noble family. His parents separated when he was 11 years old and his mother brought him up. Between the years 1872 and 1880 Maupassant served at the Ministry of Maritime Affairs and then at the Ministry of Education in order to cope with the family's financial problems. Maupassant wrote his first selection of poems called *des vers* in 1880. In the same year he published the anthology *Soirées de Medan*.

Maupassant was effected by illness in his twenties and he suffered for a long time. Eventually, he had a complete physical and emotional collapse. In his writing *La Horla*, one can see evidence of Maupassant's mental instability. In 1892 Maupassant tried to commit suicide by slitting his throat and had to be sent to an asylum in Paris, where he died next year.

Maupassant's stories were written in a highly controlled style. He was a great writer of comedy as well. His tales dealt with simple episodes from everyday life, which throw light on the hidden sides of people's personalities. Maupassant's stories and novels have a pessimistic and morbid tone.

ABOUT THE STORY

In this story Maupassant focuses on a scoundrel who defrauds an innocent girl by marrying her and then abandoning her. One cannot help but feel sorry for the cheated wife and wish for just punishment to be meted out to the scoundrel in 'The Dowry'.

Nobody was surprised by the marriage of Maitre Simon Lebrument and Mademoiselle Jeanne Cordier. Maitre Lebrument had just purchased the notary-practice of Maitre Papillon:—of course a good deal of money had to be paid for it; and Mademoiselle Jeanne had three hundred thousand francs ready cash, in bank notes and money at call.

Maitre Lebrument was a handsome young man, who had style, — a notarial style, a provincial style, — but anyhow style, and style was a rare thing at Boutigny-le-Rebours.

Mademoiselle Cordier had natural grace and a fresh complexion; her grace may have been a little marred by awkwardness of manner, and her complexion was not set off to advantage by her style of dressing; but for all that she was a fine girl, well worth wooing and winning.

The wedding turned all Boutigny topsy-turvy.

The married pair, who found themselves the subject of much admiration, returned to the conjugal domicile to hide their happiness, having resolved to make only a little trip to Paris, after first passing a few days together at home . . .

At the end of four days, Madame Lebrument simply worshipped her husband. She could not exist a single moment without him; she had to have him all day near her to pet him, to kiss him, to play with his hands, his beard.

After the first week passed, he said to his young companion:

"If you like, we'll start for Paris next Tuesday. We'll do like lovers before they get married: — we'll go to restaurants, the theaters, the concert halls, everywhere, everywhere."

She jumped for joy.

"Oh! yes, — oh! yes; let us go just as soon as possible!"

He continued:

"And then, as we must not forget anything, tell your father in advance to have your dowry all ready; — I will take it with us, and while I have the chance to see Maitre Papillon, I might as well pay him."

"I'll tell him first thing tomorrow morning."

And then he seized her in his arms to recommence that little petting game which she had learned to love so much during the previous eight days.

The following Tuesday the father-in-law and mother-in-law went to the railroad depot with their daughter and their son-in-law, who were off for Paris.

The step-father said:

"I swear to you it is not prudent to carry so much money in your pocketbook."

The young notary smiled:

"Don't worry yourself at all, beau-papa; — I'm used to these things. You must understand that in this profession of mine it sometimes happens that I have nearly a million on my person. As it is, we can escape going through a heap of formalities and delays. Don't worry yourself about us."

An employee shouted:

"All aboard for Paris!"

They rushed into a car where two old ladies were already installed.

Lebrument whispered in his wife's ear:

"This is annoying; — I shan't be able to smoke."

She answered in an undertone:

"Yes, it annoys me too, — but not on account of your cigar."

The engine whistled, and the train started. The trip lasted a full hour, during which they said little or nothing to each other, because the two old women would not go to sleep. As

soon as they found themselves in the Saint-Lazare station, Maitre Lebrument said to his wife:

"If you like, darling, we'll first breakfast somewhere on the boulevard, — then we'll come back leisurely for our baggage and have it taken to the hotel."

She consented at once.

"Oh! yes — let us breakfast at the restaurant. Is it far?"

He answered:

"Yes; it's rather far; but we'll take the omnibus."

She was surprised.

"Why not take a hack?"

He scolded her smilingly:

"And that is your idea of economy, eh? A hack for five minutes' ride at the rate of six sous a minute! You could not deny yourself anything, — eh?"

"You are right," she murmured, feeling a little confused.

A big omnibus, drawn by three horses, came along a full trot.

Lebrument shouted:

"Driver! — hey, driver!"

The ponderous vehicle paused and the young notary, pushing his wife before him, said to her in a very quick tone:

"Get inside! I'm going on top to smoke a cigarette before breakfast."

She did not have time to answer. The conductor, who had already caught her by the arm in order to help her up the step, almost pitched her into the vehicle: and she fell bewildered upon a bench, looking through the rear window, with stupefaction, at the feet of her husband ascending to the top of the conveyance.

And she sat there motionless between a big fat man who stunk of tobacco, and an old woman who smelled of dog.

All the other passengers, sitting dumbly in line — (grocery boy; a working woman; — an infantry sergeant; — a gold-spectacled gentleman, wearing a silk hat with an enormous brim, turned up at each side like a gutter-pipe; — two ladies with a great air of self-importance and a snappy manner, whose very look seemed to say, "We are here; but we do not put ourselves on any level with this crowd!" — two good Sisters; — a girl with long hair; and an undertaker) — all had the look of a lot of caricatures, a museum of grotesques, a series of ludicrous cartoons of the human faces—like those rows of absurd puppets at fairs, which people knock down with balls.

The jolts of the vehicle made all their heads sway, shook them, made the flaccid skin of their cheeks shake, and as the noise of the wheels gradually stupefied them, they seemed so many sleeping idiots.

The young wife remained there, inert:

"Why did he not come in with me?" She kept asking herself. A vague sadness oppressed her. Surely he might very well have afforded to deny himself that one cigarette!

The two good Sisters signed to the driver to stop, and got out, one after the other. The omnibus went on, and stopped again. And a cook came in, all red-faced and out of breath. She sat down, and put her market basket on her knees. A strong odour of dishwater filled the omnibus.

"Why, it is much further away than I thought," said Jeanne to herself.

The undertaker got out, and was succeeded by a coachman who smelled of stables. The long-haired girl had for successor a messenger whose feet exhaled an odour of perspiration. The notary's wife felt ill-at-ease, sick, ready to cry without knowing why.

Other persons got out; others got in. The omnibus still rolled on through interminable streets, stopping at stations, and proceeding again on its way.

"How far it is!" said Jeanne to herself. "Suppose that he forgot or went to sleep! He was very tired anyhow . . ."

Gradually all the passengers got out. She alone remained.

The driver cried out:

"Vaugirard!"

She stared at him, vaguely comprehending that he must be addressing her, since there was no one else in the omnibus. For the third time the driver yelled:

"Vaugirard!"

She asked him:

"Where are we?"

He answered in a tone of irritation:

"We're at Vaugirard, parbleu! — that's the twentieth time I've been hollering it!"

"Is it far from the Boulevard?" she asked.

"What Boulevard?"

"The Boulevard des Italians."

"We passed that ages ago!"

"Ah! . . . Please be so kind as to let my husband know."

"Your husband? — Where's he?"

"Up on top!"

"There hasn't been anyone outside for ever so long!"

She threw up her hands in terror:

"How is that? It can't be possible! He came with me, on the omnibus. Look again, please! — he must be there!"

The driver became rude:

"Here, here! that's enough talk for you, little one. One man lost, — ten to be found. Scoot now! — the trip's over. You'll find another man in the street if you want one."

Tears came to her eyes, — she persisted:

"Oh, sir, you are mistaken, — I assure you, you are mistaken. He had a great big pocketbook under his arm . . ."

The employee began to laugh:

"A great big pocketbook. Ah! yes — he got down at La Madeleine. It's all the same, — he's dropped you pretty smartly— ha! ha! ha! . . ."

The vehicle stopped. She got out, and in spite of herself glanced up instinctively at the roof of the omnibus. It was absolutely deserted.

Then she began to cry loud, without thinking that everybody would hear and see her. She sobbed:

"What is going to become of me?"

The superintendent of the station approached, and demanded:

"What is the matter?"

The driver responded in mischievous tone:

"It's a lady whose husband gave her the slip on the trip."

The other replied:

"Well, that has nothing to do with you — you just mind your own business!"

And he turned on his heel.

Then she began to walk straight ahead, — too much bewildered and terrified to even comprehend what had happened to her. Where was she to go? What was she to do? What on earth could have happened to him? How could he have made such a mistake? — how could he have so ill-treated her? — how could he have been so absent-minded?

She had just two francs in her pocket. Whom could she go to? All of a sudden she thought of her cousin Barral,

Assistant Superintendent in the Naval Department Office.

She had just enough to pay for a hack; and she had herself driven to his residence. And she met him just as he was leaving the house to go to the office. He had just such another big pocketbook under his arm as Lebrument had.

She jumped from the hack.

"Henry!" she cried.

He stopped in astonishment.

"What! Jeanne! — you here? all alone? . . . why what is the matter? — where have you come from?"

She stammered out, with her eyes full of tears:

"I lost my husband a little while ago."

"Lost him — where?"

"On an omnibus."

"On an omnibus? . . . oh!"

Then she told him all her adventure, with tears.

He listened thoughtfully. He asked:

"Well, was his head perfectly clear, this morning?"

"Yes."

"Good; Did he have much money about him?"

"Yes, — he had my dowry —"

"Your dowry? — the whole of it?"

"Yes, the whole of it . . . to pay for his practice."

"Well! well; my dear cousin, your husband must at this very moment be making tracks for Belgium."

Still she did not understand. She stammered:

"You say my husband . . . is, you say? . . ."

"I say that he has swindled you out of your — your capital . . . that's all there is about it!"

She stood there panting, suffocating; — she murmured:

"Then he is . . . he is . . . he is a scoundrel!"

And completely overcome by emotion, she hid her face

against her cousin's vest, sobbing.

As people were stopping to look at them, he pushed her very gently inside the house, and guided her up the stairs, with his arm about her waist. And, as his astonished housekeeper opened the door, he said:

"Sophie, go to the restaurant at once, and order breakfast for two. I shall not go to the office today."

Too Dear!

Leo Tolstoy

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Leo Tolstoy was a Russian novelist. A profound social and moral thinker, he was one of the greatest writers of realistic fiction of all time. Tolstoy was born in 1828 in Russia, into the family of a noble landowner. Tolstoy studied languages and law. He soon became dissatisfied with formal study and in 1847 left the university without a degree. Later he joined the army. Tolstoy returned to Saint Petersburg in 1856 and got involved in the education of peasants. He started various schools and in 1862 he married Sonya, a member of a cultured Moscow family. He had a large family and spent most of his life on his estate. In the 1880s, Tolstoy wrote such philosophical works as *A Confession*, and *What I Believe*, which was banned in 1884. Later he gave up his estate to his family and lived as a poor, celibate peasant. He is the author of three great novels, *War and Peace* (1865-69), *Anna Karenina*, (1875-77), and *Resurrection* (1899).

Tolstoy's other works are mostly novellas and short stories. Tolstoy's works reveal his search for moral codes as well as his morbid fear of death. He desired to lead a simple life. Tolstoy died of pneumonia in November 1910.

ABOUT THE STORY

'Too Dear' is a profound social satire on the bureaucratic system of Tolstoy's time. A person accused and tried for murder proves too costly for the Crown Prince and his treasury. To save costs they want the accused to run away but he refuses to do so!

Near the borders of France and Italy, on the shore of the Mediterranean Sea, lies a tiny little kingdom called Monaco. Many a small country town can boast more inhabitants than this kingdom, for there are only about seven thousand of them and if all the land in the kingdom were divided there would not be an acre for each inhabitant. But in this toy kingdom there is a real kinglet; and he has a palace, and courtiers, and ministers, and a bishop, and generals, and an army.

It is not a large army, only sixty men in all, but still it is an army. There are also taxes in this kingdom, as elsewhere: a tax on tobacco, and on wine and spirits, and a poll-tax. But though the people there drink and smoke as people do in other countries, there are so few of them that the Prince would have been hard put to it to feed his courtiers and officials and to keep himself, if he had not found a new and special source of revenue. This special revenue comes from a gaming house, where people play roulette. People play, and whether they win or lose the keeper always gets a percentage on the turnover, and out of his profits he pays a large sum to the Prince. The reason he pays so much is that it is the only such gambling establishment left in Europe. Some of the little German Sovereigns used to keep gaming houses of the same kind, but some years ago they were forbidden to do so—the reason they were stopped was because these gaming houses did so much harm. A man would come and try his luck, then he would risk all he had and lost it, then he would even risk money that did not belong to him and lose that too, and then, in despair, he would drown or shoot himself. So the Germans forbade their rulers to make money in this way; but there was no one to stop the Prince of Monaco, and he remained with monopoly of the business.

So now every one who wants to gamble goes to Monaco. Whether they win or lose, the Prince gains by it. 'You can't earn stone palaces by honest labour; as the proverb says; and the Kinglet of Monaco knows it is a dirty business, but what is he to do? He has to live; and to draw a revenue from drink and from tobacco is also not a nice thing. So he lives and reigns, and rakes in the money, and holds his court with all the ceremony of a real king.

He has his coronation, his levels; he rewards, sentences, and pardons; and he also has his reviews, councils, laws, and courts of justice: just like other kings, only all on a smaller scale.

Now it happened a few years ago that a murder was committed in this toy Prince's domains. The people of that kingdom are peaceable, and such a thing had not happened before. The judges assembled with much ceremony and tried the case in the most judicial manner. There were judges, and prosecutors, and jurymen, and barristers. They argued and judged, and at last they condemned directly. So far so good. Next they submitted the sentence to the Prince. The Prince read the sentence and confirmed it. "If the fellow must be executed, execute him."

There was only one hitch in the matter; and that was that they had neither a guillotine for cutting heads off, nor an executioner. The Ministers considered the matter, and decided to address an inquiry to the French Government, asking whether the French could not lend them a machine and an expert to cut off the criminal's head; and if so, would the French kindly inform them what it would cost. The letter was sent. A week later the reply came: a machine and an expert could be supplied, and the cost would be 16,000 francs. This was laid before the king. He thought it over. Sixteen thousand

francs! The wretch is not worth the money; said he. "Can't it be done, somehow, cheaper? Why 16,000 francs is more than two francs a head on the whole population. The people won't stand it, and it may cause a riot!"

So a Council was called to consider what could be done; and it was decided to send a similar inquiry to the King of Italy. The French government is republican, and has no proper respect for kings; but the King of Italy was a brother monarch and might be induced to do the thing cheaper. So the letter was written, and a prompt reply was received.

The Italian government wrote that they would have pleasure in supplying both a machine and an expert; and the whole cost would be 12,000 francs, including travelling expenses. This was cheaper, but still it seemed too much. The rascal was really not worth the money. It would still mean nearly two francs more per head on the taxes. Another Council was called. They discussed and considered how it could be done with less expense. Could not one of the soldiers, perhaps, be got to do it in a rough and homely fashion? The General was called and was asked: Can't you find us a soldier who would cut the man's head off? In war they don't mind killing people. In fact, that is what they are trained for. So the General talked it over with the soldiers to see whether one of them would not undertake the job. But none of the soldiers would do it. "No", they said, "We don't know how to do it; it is not a thing we have been taught."

What was to be done? Again the Ministers considered and reconsidered. They assembled a Commission, and a Committee, and a Sub-Committee, and at last they decided that the best thing would be to alter the death sentence to one of imprisonment for life. They would enable the Prince to show his mercy, and it would come cheaper.

The Prince agreed to this, and so the matter was arranged. The only hitch now was that there was no suitable prison for a man sentenced for life. There was a small lock-up where people were sometimes kept temporarily, but there was no strong prison fit for permanent use. However, they managed to find a place that would do, and they put the young fellow there and placed a guard over him. The guard had to watch the criminal, and had also to fetch his food from the palace kitchen.

The prisoner remained there month after month till a year had passed. But when a year had passed, the Kinglet, looking over the account of the income and expenditure one day, noticed a new item of expenditure. This was for the keep of the criminal; nor was it a small item either. There was a special guard, and there was also the man's food. It came to more than 600 francs a year. And the worst of it was that the fellow was still young and healthy, and might live for fifty years. When one came to reckon it up, the matter was serious. It would never do. So the Prince summoned his Ministers and said to them:

"You must find some cheaper way of dealing with this rascal. The present plan is too expensive." And the Ministers met and considered and reconsidered, till one of them said: "Gentlemen, in my opinion we must dismiss the guard." "But then, rejoined another Minister," "the fellow will run away." "Well," said the first speaker, "let him run away, and be hanged to him!" So they reported the result of their deliberations to the Kinglet, and he agreed with them. The guard was dismissed, and they waited to see what would happen. All that happened was that at dinner-time the criminal came out, and, not finding his guard, he went to the Prince's kitchen to fetch his own dinner. He took what was given

him, returned to the prison, shut the door on himself, and stayed inside. Next day the same thing occurred. He went for his food at the proper time; but as for running away, he did not show the least sign of it! What was to be done? They considered the matter again.

"We shall have to tell him straight out", said they, "that we do not want to keep him." So the Minister of Justice had him brought before him.

"Why do you not run away?" said the Minister. "There is no guard to keep you. You can go where you like, and the prince will not mind."

"I dare say the Prince would not mind," replied the man, "but I have nowhere to go. What can I do? You have ruined my character by your sentence and people will turn their backs on me. Besides, I have got out of the way of working. You have treated me badly. It is not fair. In the first place, when once you sentenced me to death you ought to have executed me; but you did not do it. That's one thing I did not complain about that. Then you sentenced me to imprisonment for life and put a guard to bring me my food; but after a time you took him away again and I had to fetch my own food. Again I did not complain. But now you actually want me to go away! I can't agree to that. You may do as you like, but I won't go away!"

What was to be done? Once more the Council was summoned. What course could they adopt? The man would not go. They reflected and considered. The only way to get rid of him was to offer him a pension. And so they reported to the Prince. "There is nothing else for it," said they; "we must get rid of him somehow." The sum fixed was 600 francs, and this was announced to the prisoner.

"Well," said he, "I don't mind, so long as you undertake

to pay it regularly. On that condition I am willing to go."

So the matter was settled. He received one-third of his annuity in advance, and left the King's dominions. It was only a quarter of an hour by rail; and he emigrated, and settled just across the frontier, where he bought a bit of land, started market-gardening, and now lives comfortably. He always goes at the proper time to draw his pension. Having received it, he goes to the gaming tables, stakes two or three francs, sometimes wins and sometimes loses, and then returns home. He lives peaceably and well.

It is a good thing that he did not commit his crime in a country where they do not grudge expense to cut a man's head off or to keep him in prison for life.

Most Beautiful

Ruskin Bond

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ruskin Bond was born to British parents on May 19, 1934, in Kasauli, a small town in the foothills of the Himalayas. As a child he spent most of his time in the princely state of Jamnagar. His grandparents lived in the Doon Valley in the Himalayas and he stayed with them as well. Bond went to the Bishop Cotton School in Simla. After completing his school education in 1950, Bond went to England. His love for the Himalayan mountains haunted him and while still a teenager he wrote his first novel, *The Room on the Roof* (which won the John Llewellyn Rhys Prize awarded to a British Commonwealth writer under 30).

Ruskin Bond has lived in Mussoorie for more than three decades now. Not only are the mountains his home, but are also his greatest source of inspiration as a writer of short stories. On February 18, 1993, the Sahitya Akademi of India presented Ruskin Bond the award for the most outstanding Indian writer in English. Ruskin Bond's stories reflect his passion for the trees, wild flowers, birds, animals, rivers, and the simple hill-folk who are the life of the Himalayas.

ABOUT THE STORY

In 'Most Beautiful' the author's sympathy is complete for the retarded child who seeks love. His bitterness at his own inadequacies and society's indifference are brought to the forefront very effectively.

I don't quite know why I found that particular town so heartless, perhaps because of its crowded, claustrophobic atmosphere, its congested and insanitary lanes, its weary people . . . One day I found the children of the bazaar tormenting a deformed retarded boy.

About a dozen boys, between the ages of eight and fourteen, were jeering at the retard, who was making things worse for himself by confronting the gang and shouting abuses at them. The boy was twelve or thirteen, judging by his face; but had the height of an eight or nine-year old. His legs were thick, short and bowed. He had a small chest but his arms were long, making him rather ape-like in his attitude. His forehead and cheeks were pitted with the scars of small-pox. He was ugly by normal standards, and the gibberish he spoke did nothing to discourage his tormentors. They threw mud and stones at him, while keeping well out of his reach. Few can be more cruel than a gang of schoolboys in high spirits.

I was an uneasy observer of the scene. I felt that I ought to do something to put a stop to it, but lacked the courage to interfere. It was only when a stone struck the boy on the face, cutting open his cheek, that I lost my normal discretion and ran in amongst the boys, shouting at them and clouting those I could reach. They scattered like defeated soldiery.

I was surprised at my own daring, and rather relieved when the boys did not return. I took the frightened, angry boy by the hand, and asked him where he lived. He drew away from me, but I held on to his fat little fingers and told him I would take him home. He mumbled something incoherent and pointed down a narrow lane. I led him away from the bazaar.

I said very little to the boy because it was obvious that he had some defect of speech. When he stopped outside a door

set in a high wall, I presumed that we had come to his house.

The door was opened by a young woman. The boy immediately threw his arms around her and burst into tears. I had not been prepared for the boy's mother. Not only did she look perfectly normal physically, but she was also strikingly handsome. She must have been about thirty-five.

She thanked me for bringing her son home, and asked me into the house. The boy withdrew into a corner of the sitting-room, and sat on his haunches in gloomy silence, his bow legs looking even more grotesque in this posture. His mother offered me tea but I asked for a glass of water. She asked the boy to fetch it, and he did so, thrusting the glass into my hands without looking me in the face.

"Suresh is my only son", she said; "My husband is disappointed in him, but I love my son. Do you think he is very ugly?"

"Ugly is just a word", I said. "Like beauty. They mean different things to different people. What did the poet say? "Beauty is truth, truth is beauty." But if beauty and truth are same thing why have different words? There are no absolutes except birth and death."

The boy squatted down at her feet, cradling his head in her lap. With the end of her sari, she began wiping his face. "Have you tried teaching him to talk properly?" I asked.

"He has been like this since childhood. The doctors can do nothing."

While we were talking the father came in, and the boy slunk away to the kitchen. The man thanked me curtly for bringing the boy home, and seemed at once to dismiss the whole matter from his mind. He seemed preoccupied with business matters. I got the impression that he had long since resigned himself to having a deformed son, and his early

disappointment had changed to indifference. When I got up to leave, his wife accompanied me to the front door.

"Please do not mind if my husband is a little rude," she said. "His business is not going too well. If you would like to come again please do. Suresh does not meet many people who treat him like a normal person."

I knew that I wanted to visit them again—more out of sympathy for the mother than out of pity for the boy. But I realised that she was not interested in me personally, except as a possible mentor for her son.

After about a week I went to the house again.

Suresh's father was away on a business trip, and I stayed for lunch. The boy's mother made some delicious parathas stuffed with ground radish, and served it with pickle and curds. If Suresh ate like an animal, gobbling his food, I was not far behind him. His mother encouraged him to overeat. He was morose and uncommunicative when he ate, but when I suggested that he come with me for a walk, he looked up eagerly. At the same time a look of fear passed across his mother's face.

"Will it be all right?" she asked, "You have seen how other children treat him. That day he slipped out of the house without telling anyone."

"We won't go towards the bazaar", I said. "I was thinking of a walk in the fields."

Suresh made encouraging noises and thumped the table with his fists to show that he wanted to go. Finally his mother consented, and the boy and I set off down the road.

He could not walk very fast because of his awkward legs, but this gave me a chance to point out to him anything that I thought might arouse his interest—parrots squabbling in a banyan tree, buffaloes wallowing in a muddy pond, a group

of hermaphrodite musicians strolling down the road. Suresh took a keen interest in the hermaphrodites, perhaps because they were grotesque in their own way: tall, masculine-looking people dressed in women's garments, ankle-bells jingling on their heavy feet, and their long, gaunt faces made up with rouge and mascara. For the first time, I heard Suresh laugh. Apparently he had discovered that there were human beings even odder than he. And like any human being, he lost no time in deriding them.

"Don't laugh", I said. "They were born that way, just as you were born the way you are."

But he did not take me seriously and grinned, his wide mouth revealing surprisingly strong teeth.

We reached the dry river-bed on the outskirts of the town, and crossing it entered a field of yellow mustard flowers. The mustard stretched away towards the edge of a sub-tropical forest. Seeing trees in the distance, Suresh began to run towards them, shouting and clapping his hands. He had never been out of town before. The courtyard of his house and, occasionally, the road to the bazaar, were all that he had seen of the world. Now the trees beckoned him.

We found a small stream running through the forest and I took off my clothes and leapt into the cool water, inviting Suresh to join me. He hesitated about taking off his clothes; but after watching me for a while, his eagerness to join me overcame his self-consciousness, and he exposed his misshapen little body to the soft spring sunshine.

He waded clumsily towards me. The water which came only to my knees reached up to his chest.

"Come, I'll teach you, to swim", I said. And lifting him up from the waist, I held him afloat. He spluttered and thrashed around, but stopped struggling when he found that

he could stay afloat.

Later, sitting on the banks of the stream, he discovered a small turtle sitting over a hole in the ground in which it had laid the eggs. He had never watched a turtle before; and watched it in fascination, while it drew its head into its shell and then thrust it out again with extreme circumspection. He must have felt that the turtle resembled him in some respects, with its squat legs, rounded back, and tendency to hide its head from the world.

After that, I went to the boy's house about twice a week, and we nearly always visited the stream. Before long Suresh was able to swim a short distance. Knowing how to swim—this was something the bazaar boys never learnt—gave him a certain confidence, made his life something more than a one-dimensional existence.

The more I saw Suresh, the less conscious was I of his deformities. For me, he was fast becoming the norm; while the children of the bazaar seemed abnormal in their very similarity to each other. That he was still conscious of his ugliness—and how could he ever cease to be—was made clear to me about two months after our first meeting.

We were coming home through the mustard fields, which had turned from yellow to green, when I noticed that we were being followed by a small goat. It appeared to have been separated from its mother, and now attached itself to us. Though I tried driving the kid away, it continued tripping along at our heels, and when Suresh found that it persisted in accompanying us, he picked it up and took it home.

The kid became his main obsession during the next few days. He fed it with his own hands and allowed it to sleep at the foot of his bed. It was a pretty little kid, with fairy horns and an engaging habit of doing a hop, skip and jump

when moving about the house. Everyone admired the pet, and the boy's mother and I both remarked on how pretty it was.

His resentment against the animal began to show when others started admiring it. He suspected that they found it better looking than its owner. I remember finding him squatting in front of a low mirror, holding the kid in his arms, and studying their reflections in the glass. After a few minutes of this, Suresh thrust the goat away. When he noticed that I was watching him, he got up and left the room without looking at me.

Two days later, when I called at the house, I found his mother looking very upset. I could see that she had been crying. But she seemed relieved to see me, and took me into the sitting room. When Suresh saw me, he got up from the floor and ran to the verandah.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

"It was the little goat", she said. "Suresh killed it."

She told me how Suresh, in a sudden and uncontrollable rage, had thrown a brick at the kid, breaking its skull. What had upset her more than the animal's death was the fact that Suresh had shown no regret for what he had done.

"I'll talk to him", I said, and went out on the verandah; but the boy had disappeared.

"He must have gone to the bazaar", said his mother anxiously. "He does that when he's upset. Sometimes I think he likes to be teased and beaten."

He was not in the bazaar. I found him near the stream, lying flat on his belly in the soft mud, chasing tadpoles with a stick.

"Why did you kill the goat?" I asked.

He shrugged his shoulders.

"Did you enjoy killing it?"

He looked at me and smiled and nodded his head vigorously.

"How very cruel;" I said. But I did not mean it. I knew that his cruelty was no different from mine or anyone else's; only his was an untrammelled cruelty, primitive, as yet undisguised by civilizing restraints."

He took a pen-knife from his shirt pocket opened it, and held it out to me by the blade. He pointed to his bare stomach and motioned me to thrust the blade into his belly. He had such a mournful look on his face (the result of having offended me and not in remorse for the goat-sacrifice) that I had to burst out laughing.

"You are a funny fellow", I said, taking the knife from him and throwing it into the stream. "Come, let's have a swim."

We swam all afternoon, and Suresh went home smiling. His mother and I conspired to keep the whole affair a secret from his father — who had not in any case, been aware of the goat's presence.

Suresh seemed quite contented during the following weeks. And then I received a letter offering me a job in Delhi and I knew that I would have to take it, as I was earning very little by my writing at the time.

The boy's mother was disappointed, even depressed, when I told her I would be going away. I think she had grown quite fond of me. But the boy, always unpredictable, displayed no feeling at all. I felt a little hurt by his apparent indifference. Did our weeks of companionship mean nothing to him? I told myself that he probably did not realize that he might never see me again.

On the evening my train was to leave, I went to the house

to say goodbye. The boy's mother made me promise to write to them, but Suresh seemed cold and distant, and refused to sit near me or take my hand. He made me feel that I was an outsider again one of the mob throwing stones at odd and frightening people.

At eight o'clock that evening I entered a third-class compartment and, after a brief scuffle with several other travellers, succeeded in securing a seat near a window. It enabled me to look down the length of the platform.

The guard had blown his whistle and the train was about to leave, when I saw Suresh standing near the station turnstile, looking up and down the platform.

"Suresh!" I shouted and he heard me and came hobbling along the platform. He had run the gauntlet of bazaar during the busiest hour of the evening.

"I'll be back next year." I called.

The train had begun moving out of the station, and as I waved to Suresh, he broke into a stumbling run, waving his arms in frantic, restraining gestures.

I saw him stumble against someone's bedding.

The Seventh Pullet

H H Munro (Saki)

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Hector Hugh Munro, known more popularly as Saki (his pseudonym) was born in Burma in 1870. He was the youngest of three children. His mother died when he was an infant, which is why he, along with his brother and sister were raised in Devon by two aunts. Many of Saki's stories reflect some of his unpleasant experiences with them. At the age of twenty-three, like many others in his family, Saki joined the military police in Burma. He suffered recurrent attacks of malaria, which forced him to resign a year later. He moved to England in order to recuperate and subsequently began to write political satires for *The Westminster Gazette* in 1896 and became the Balkans correspondent for the *Morning Post* in 1902. He also wrote for *The Bystander*, *The Daily Express* and *The Outlook*. He enlisted when war broke out and was killed in 1916.

He received inspiration for his pen name Saki (a cupbearer) from the *Rubaiyat* of Omar Khayyam. Though he gained recognition as a journalist during his lifetime, Munro is remembered today as a great short story writer. His writing style is witty, and his fiction sometimes borders on the outrageous. He is best known for his darkly humorous satires.

ABOUT THE STORY

'The Seventh Pullet' is an amusing story about a common man who seeks popularity by telling exaggerated, dramatic tales. The irony of the situation is, when his wife dies during a game of cards, he is accused of wanting to claim widespread publicity.

"It's not the daily grind that I complain of," said Blenkinthrope resentfully; "it's the dull grey sameness of my life outside of office hours. Nothing of interest comes my way, nothing remarkable or out of the common. Even the little things that I do try to find some interest in don't seem to interest other people. Things in my garden, for instance."

"The potato that weighed just over two pounds," said his friend Gorworth.

"Did I tell you about that?" said Blenkinthrope; "I was telling the others in the train this morning. I forgot if I'd told you."

"To be exact you told me that it weighed just under two pounds, but I took into account the fact that abnormal vegetables and freshwater fish have an after-life, in which growth is not arrested."

"You're just like the others," said Blenkinthrope sadly, "you only make fun of it."

"The fault is with the potato, not with us," said Gorworth; "we are not in the least interested in it because it is not in the least interesting. The men you go up in the train with every day are just in the same case as yourself; their lives are commonplace and not very interesting to themselves, and they certainly are not going to wax enthusiastic over the commonplace events in other men's lives. Tell them something startling, dramatic, piquant, that has happened to yourself or to some one in your family, and you will capture their interest at once. They will talk about you with a certain personal pride to all their acquaintances. 'Man I know intimately, fellow called Blenkinthrope, lives down my way, had two of his fingers clawed clean off by a lobster he was carrying home to supper. Doctor says entire hand may have to come off.' Now that is conversation of a very high order. But imagine walking

into a tennis club with the remark: 'I know a man who has grown a potato weighing two and a quarter pounds.'

"But hang it all, my dear fellow," said Blenkinthroe impatiently, "haven't I just told you that nothing of a remarkable nature ever happens to me?"

"Invent something," said Gorworth. Since winning a prize of excellence in Scriptural knowledge at a preparatory school he had felt licensed to be a little more unscrupulous than the circle he moved in. Much might surely be excused to one who in early life could give a list of seventeen trees mentioned in the Old Testament.

"What sort of thing?" asked Blenkinthroe, somewhat snappishly.

"A snake got into your hen-run yesterday morning and killed six out of seven pullets, first mesmerizing them with its eyes and then biting them as they stood helpless. The seventh pullet was one of that French sort, with feathers all over its eyes, so it escaped the mesmeric snare, and just flew at what it could see of the snake and pecked it to pieces."

"Thank you," said Blenkinthroe stiffly; "it's a very clever invention. If such a thing had really happened in my poultry-run I admit I should have been proud and interested to tell people about it. But I'd rather stick to fact, even if it is plain fact." All the same his mind dwelt wistfully on the story of the Seventh Pullet. He could picture himself telling it in the train amid the absorbed interest of his fellow-passengers. Unconsciously all sorts of little details and improvements began to suggest themselves.

Wistfulness was still his dominant mood when he took his seat in the railway carriage the next morning. Opposite him sat Stevenham, who had attained to a recognized brevet of importance through the fact of an uncle having dropped

dead in the act of voting at a Parliamentary election. That had happened three years ago, but Stevenham was still deferred to on all questions of home and foreign politics.

"Hullo, how's the giant mushroom, or whatever it was?" was all the notice Blenkinthroe got from his fellow travellers.

Young Duckby, whom he mildly disliked, speedily monopolized the general attention by an account of a domestic bereavement.

"Had four young pigeons carried off last night by a whacking big rat. Oh, a monster he must have been; you could tell by the size of the hole he made breaking into the loft."

No moderate-sized rat ever seemed to carry out any predatory operations in these regions; they were all enormous in their enormity.

"Pretty hard lines that," continued Duckby, seeing that he had secured the attention and respect of the company; "four squeakers carried off at one swoop. You'd find it rather hard to match that in the way of unlooked-for bad luck."

"I had six pullets out of a pen of seven killed by a snake yesterday afternoon," said Blenkinthroe, in a voice which he hardly recognized as his own.

"By a snake?" came in excited chorus.

"It fascinated them with its deadly, glittering eyes, one after the other, and struck them down while they stood helpless. A bedridden neighbour, who wasn't able to call for assistance, witnessed it all from her bedroom window."

"Well, I never!" broke in the chorus, with variations.

"The interesting part of it is about the seventh pullet, the one that didn't get killed," resumed Blenkinthroe, slowly lighting a cigarette. His diffidence had left him, and he was beginning to recall how safe and easy depravity can seem

once one has the courage to begin. "The six dead birds were Minorcas; the seventh was a Houdan with a mop of feathers all over its eyes. It could hardly see the snake at all, so of course it wasn't mesmerized like the others. It just could see something wriggling on the ground, and went for it and pecked it to death."

"Well, I'm blessed!" exclaimed the chorus.

In the course of the next few days Blenkinthroe discovered how little the loss of one's self-respect affects one when one has gained the esteem of the world. His story found its way into one of the poultry papers, and was copied thence into a daily news-sheet as a matter of general interest. A lady wrote from the North of Scotland recounting a similar episode which she had witnessed as occurring between a stoat and a blind grouse. Somehow a lie seems so much less reprehensible when one can call it a lie.

For a while the adapter of the Seventh Pullet story enjoyed to the full his altered standing as a person of consequence, one who had had some share in the strange events of his times. Then he was thrust once again into the cold grey background by the sudden blossoming into importance of Smith-Paddon, a daily fellow-traveller, whose little girl had been knocked down and nearly hurt by a car belonging to a musical-comedy actress. The actress was not in the car at the time, but she was in numerous photographs which appeared in the illustrated papers of Zoto Dobreen inquiring after the well-being of Maisie, daughter of Edmund Smith-Paddon, Esq. With this new human interest to absorb them the travelling companions were almost rude when Blenkinthroe tried to explain his contrivance for keeping vipers and peregrine falcons out of his chicken-run.

Gorworth, to whom he unburdened himself in private,

gave him the same counsel as theretofore.

"Invent something."

"Yes, but what?"

The ready affirmative coupled with the question betrayed a significant shifting of the ethical standpoint.

It was a few days later that Blenkinthroe revealed a chapter of family history to the customary gathering in the railway carriage.

"Curious thing happened to my aunt, the one who lives in Paris," he began. He had several aunts, but they were all geographically distributed over Greater London.

"She was sitting on a seat in the Bois the other afternoon, after lunching at the Roumanian Legation."

Whatever the story gained in picturesqueness for the dragging-in of diplomatic "atmosphere," it ceased from that moment to command any acceptance as a record of current events. Gorworth had warned his neophyte that this would be the case, but the traditional enthusiasm of the neophyte had triumphed over discretion.

"She was feeling rather drowsy, the effect probably of the champagne, which she's not in the habit of taking in the middle of the day."

A subdued murmur of admiration went round the company. Blenkinthroe's aunts were not used to taking champagne in the middle of the year, regarding it exclusively as a Christmas and New Year accessory.

"Presently a rather portly gentleman passed by her seat and paused an instant to light a cigar. At that moment a youngish man came up behind him, drew the blade from a swordstick, and stabbed him half a dozen times through and through. 'Scoundrel,' he cried to his victim - 'do not know me. My name is Henri Leture.' The elder man wiped away

some of the blood that was spattering his clothes, turned to his assailant, and said: 'And since when has an attempted assassination been considered an introduction?' Then he finished lighting his cigar and walked away. My aunt had intended screaming for the police; but seeing the indifference with which the principal in the affair treated the matter she felt that it would be an impertinence on her part to interfere. Of course I need hardly say she put the whole thing down to the effects of a warm, drowsy afternoon and the Legation champagne. Now comes the astonishing part of my story. A fortnight later a bank manager was stabbed to death with a swordstick in that very part of the Bois. His assassin was the son of a charwoman formerly working at the bank, who had been dismissed from her job by the manager on account of chronic intemperance. His name was Henri Leture."

From that moment Blenkinthroe was tacitly accepted as the Munchausen of the party. No effort was spared to draw him out from day to day in the exercise of testing their powers of credulity, and Blenkinthroe, in the false security of an assured and receptive audience, waxed industrious and ingenious in supplying the demand for marvels. Duckby's satirical story of a tame otter that had a tank in the garden to swim in, and whined restlessly whenever the water-rate was overdue, was scarcely an unfair parody of some of Blenkinthroe's wilder efforts. And then one day came Nemesis.

Returning to his villa one evening Blenkinthroe found his wife sitting in front of a pack of cards, which she was scrutinizing with unusual concentration.

"The same old patience-game?" he asked carelessly.

"No, dear; this is the Death's Head patience, the most difficult of them all. I've never got it to work out, and somehow

I should be rather frightened if I did. Mother only got it out once in her life; she was afraid of it, too. Her great-aunt had done it once and fallen dead from excitement the next moment, and mother always had a feeling that she would die if she ever got it out. She died the same night that she did it. She was in bad health at the time, certainly, but it was a strange coincidence."

"Don't do it if it frightens you," was Blenkinthroe's practical comment as he left the room. A few minutes later his wife called to him.

"John, it gave me such a turn, I nearly got it out. Only the five of diamonds held me up at the end. I really thought I'd done it."

"Why, you can do it," said Blenkinthroe, who had come back to the room; "if you shift the eight of clubs on to that open nine the five can be moved on to the six."

His wife made the suggested move with hasty, trembling fingers, and piled the outstanding cards on to their respective packs. Then she followed the example of her mother and great grand aunt.

Blenkinthroe had been genuinely fond of his wife, but in the midst of his bereavement one dominant thought obtruded itself. Something sensational and real had at last come into his life; no longer was it a grey, colourless record. The headlines which might appropriately describe his domestic tragedy kept shaping themselves in his brain. "Inherited presentiment comes true." "The Death's Head patience: Card-game that justified its sinister name in three generations." He wrote out a full story of the fatal occurrence for the Essex Vedette, the editor of which was a friend of his, and to another friend he gave a condensed account, to be taken up to the office of one of the halfpenny dailies. But in both cases

his reputation as a romancer stood fatally in the way of the fulfilment of his ambitions. "Not the right thing to be Munchausening in a time of sorrow," agreed his friends among themselves, and a brief note of regret at the "sudden death of the wife of our respected neighbour, Mr John Blenkinshope, from heart failure," appearing in the news column of the local paper was the forlorn outcome of his visions of widespread publicity.

Blenkinshope shrank from the society of his erstwhile travelling companions and took to travelling townwards by an earlier train. He sometimes tries to enlist the sympathy and attention of a chance acquaintance in details of the whistling prowess of his best canary or the dimensions of his largest beetroot; he scarcely recognizes himself as the man who was once spoken about and pointed out as the owner of the Seventh Pullet.

The Young King

Oscar Wilde

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Oscar Wilde was born in Dublin, on 16 October 1854. His father was a famous eye-surgeon and his mother was a writer. He studied at Trinity College, Dublin, and later at Magdalen College, Oxford. He got married in 1884 and had two sons. The next decade was his most prolific and the time when he wrote the plays for which he is best remembered. His writing and particularly his plays are witty as Wilde was not afraid to shock the public. For this he was imprisoned.

While in prison, Wilde was declared bankrupt. On his release he had to be supported by his friends in Paris. His reputation suffered greatly as a result and the performances of his plays were cancelled. Wilde's wife changed her surname and with her two young sons, moved abroad to escape the scandal. He was received into the Catholic Church on 29 November 1900, and died a day later.

Wilde's first success came with *The Happy Prince* published in 1888, but his novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray* offended Victorian sensibilities. The triumph of his play *Lady Windermere's Fan* proved to be the beginning of his most glorious years.

ABOUT THE STORY

'The Young King' like some of Oscar Wilde's other stories is like a fairy-tale where the good and the bad are juxtaposed. 'The Young King' has biblical overtones where the young king is transformed from a selfish king to a friend of the poor.

It was the night before the day fixed for his coronation, and the young King was sitting alone in his beautiful chamber. His courtiers had all taken their leave of him, bowing their heads to the ground, according to the ceremonious usage of the day, and had retired to the Great Hall of the Palace, to receive a few last lessons from the Professor of Etiquette; there being some of them who had still quite natural manners, which in a courtier is I need hardly say, a very grave offence.

The lad—for he was only a lad, being but sixteen years of age—was not sorry at their departure, and had flung himself back with a deep sigh of relief on the soft cushions of his embroidered couch, lying there, wild-eyed and open-mouthed, like a brown woodland Faun, or some young animal of the forest newly snared by the hunters.

And, indeed, it was the hunters who had found him, coming upon him almost by chance as, bare-limbed and pipe in hand, he was following the flock of the poor goatherd who had brought him up, and whose son he had always fancied himself to be. The child of the old King's only daughter by a secret marriage with one much beneath her in station—a stranger, some said, who, by the wonderful magic of his lute-playing, had made the young Princess love him; while others spoke of an artist from Rimini, to whom the Princess had shown much, perhaps too much honour, and who had suddenly disappeared from the city, leaving his work in the Cathedral unfinished—he had been, when but a week old, stolen away from his mother's side, as she slept, and given into the charge of a common peasant and his wife, who were without children of their own, and lived in a remote part of the forest, more than a day's ride from the town. Grief, or the plague, as the court physician stated, or, as some suggested, a swift Italian poison administered in a cup of spiced wine,

slew, within an hour of her wakening, the white girl who had given him birth, and as the trusty messenger who bare the child across his saddle-bow, stooped from his weary horse and knocked at the rude door of the goatherd's hut, the body of the Princess was being lowered into an open grave that had been dug in a deserted churchyard, beyond the city gates, a grave where, it was said, that another body was also lying, that of a young man of marvellous and foreign beauty, whose hands were tied behind him with a knotted cord, and whose breast was stabbed with many red wounds.

Such, at least, was the story that men whispered to each other. Certain it was that the old King, when on his death-bed, whether moved by remorse for his great sin, or merely desiring that the kingdom should not pass away from his line, had had the lad sent for, and, in the presence of the Council, had acknowledged him as his heir.

And it seems that from the very first moment of his recognition he had shown signs of that strange passion for beauty that was destined to have so great an influence over his life. Those who accompanied him to the suite of rooms set apart for his service, often spoke of the cry of pleasure that broke from his lips when he saw the delicate raiment and rich jewels that had been prepared for him, and of the almost fierce joy with which he flung aside his rough leathern tunic and coarse sheepskin cloak. He missed, indeed, at times the fine freedom of his forest life, and was always apt to chafe at the tedious Court ceremonies that occupied so much of each day, but the wonderful palace—Joyeuse, as they called it—of which he now found himself lord, seemed to him to be a new world fresh-fashioned for his delight; and as soon as he could escape from the council-board or audience-chamber, he would run down the great staircase, with its lions of gilt

bronze and its steps of bright porphyry, and wander from room to room, and from corridor to corridor, like one who was seeking to find in beauty a sort of restoration from sickness.

Many curious stories were related about him at this period. It was said that a stout Burgomaster, who had come to deliver a florid oratorical address on behalf of the citizens of the town, had caught sight of him kneeling in real adoration before a great picture that had just been brought from Venice, and that seemed to herald the worship of some new gods. On another occasion he had been missed for several hours, and after a lengthened search had been discovered in a little chamber in one of the northern turrets of the palace gazing, as one in a trance, at a Greek gem carved with the figure of Adonis. He had been seen, so the tale ran, pressing his warm lips to the marble brow of an antique statue that had been discovered in the bed of the river on the occasion of the building of the stone bridge, and was inscribed with the name of the Bithynian slave of Hadrian. He had passed a whole night in noting the effect of the moonlight on a silver image of Endymion.

All rare and costly materials had certainly a great fascination for him, and in his eagerness to procure them he had sent away many merchants, some to traffic for amber with the rough fisher-folk of the north seas, some to Egypt to look for that curious green turquoise which is found only in the tombs of kings, and is said to possess magical properties, some to Persia for silken carpets and painted pottery, and others to India to buy gauze and stained ivory, moonstones and bracelets of jade, sandalwood and blue enamel and shawls of fine wool.

But what had occupied him most was the robe he was to

wear at his coronation, the robe of tissued gold, and the ruby-studded crown, and the sceptre with its rows and rings of pearls. Indeed, it was of this that he was thinking to-night, as he lay back on his luxurious couch, watching the great pinewood log that was burning itself out on the open hearth. The designs, which were from the hands of the most famous artists of the time, had been submitted to him many months before, and he had given orders that the artificers were to toil night and day to carry them out, and that the whole world was to be searched for jewels that would be worthy of their work. He saw himself in fancy standing at the high altar of the cathedral in the fair raiment of a King, and a smile played and lingered about his boyish lips, and lit up with a bright lustre his dark woodland eyes.

After some time he rose from his seat, and leaning against the carved penthouse of the chimney, looked round at the dimly-lit room. The walls were hung with rich tapestries representing the Triumph of Beauty. A large press, inlaid with agate and lapis-lazuli, filled one corner, and facing the window stood a curiously wrought cabinet with lacquer panels of powdered and mosaiced gold, on which were placed some delicate goblets of Venetian glass, and a cup of dark-veined onyx. Pale poppies were embroidered on the silk coverlet of the bed, as though they had fallen from the tired hands of sleep, and tall reeds of fluted ivory bare up the velvet canopy, from which great tufts of ostrich plumes sprang, like white foam, to the pallid silver of the fretted ceiling. A laughing Narcissus in green bronze held a polished mirror above its head. On the table stood a flat bowl of amethyst.

Outside he could see the huge dome of the cathedral, looming like a bubble over the shadowy houses, and the weary sentinels pacing up and down on the misty terrace by

the river. Far away, in an orchard, a nightingale was singing. A faint perfume of jasmine came through the open window. He brushed his brown curls back from his forehead, and taking up a lute, let his fingers stray across the cords. His heavy eyelids drooped, and a strange languor came over him. Never before had he felt so keenly, or with such exquisite joy, the magic and the mystery of beautiful things.

When midnight sounded from the clock-tower he touched a bell, and his pages entered and disrobed him with much ceremony, pouring rose water over his hands, and strewing flowers on his pillow. A few moments after that they had left the room, he fell asleep.

And as he slept he dreamed a dream, and this was his dream.

He thought that he was standing in a long, low attic, amidst the whirr and clatter of many looms. The meagre daylight peered in through the grated windows, and showed him the gaunt figures of the weavers bending over their cases. Pale, sickly-looking children were crouched on the huge crossbeams. As the shuttles dashed through the warp they lifted up the heavy battens, and when the shuttles stopped they let the battens fall and pressed the threads together. Their faces were pinched with famine, and their thin hands shook and trembled. Some haggard women were seated at a table sewing. A horrible odour filled the place. The air was foul and heavy, and the walls dripped and streamed with damp.

The young King went over to one of the weavers, and stood by him and watched him.

And the weaver looked at him angrily, and said, "Why art thou watching me? Art thou a spy set on us by our master?"

"Who is thy master?" asked the young King.

"Our master!" cried the weaver, bitterly. "He is a man like myself. Indeed, there is but this difference between us—that he wears fine clothes while I go in rags, and that while I am weak from hunger he suffers not a little from overfeeding."

"The land is free," said the young King, "and thou art no man's slave."

"In war," answered the weaver, "the strong make slaves of the weak, and in peace the rich make slaves of the poor. We must work to live, and they give us such mean wages that we die. We toil for them all day long, and they heap up gold in their coffers, and our children fade away before their time, and the faces of those we love become hard and evil. We tread out the grapes, and another drinks the wine. We sow the corn, and our own board is empty. We have chains, though no eye beholds them; and are slaves, though men call us free."

"Is it so with all?" he asked.

"It is so with all," answered the weaver, "with the young as well as with the old, with the women as well as with the men, with the little children as well as with those who are stricken in years. The merchants grind us down, and we must needs do their bidding. The priest rides by and tells his beads, and no man has care of us. Through our sunless lanes creeps Poverty with her hungry eyes, and Sin with his sodden face follows close behind her. Misery wakes us in the morning, and Shame sits with us at night. But what are these things to thee? Thou art not one of us. Thy face is too happy." And he turned away scowling, and threw the shuttle across the loom, and the young King saw that it was threaded with a thread of gold.

And a great terror seized upon him, and he said to the weaver, "What robe is this that thou art weaving?"

"It is the robe for the coronation of the young King," he answered; "what is that to thee?"

And the young King gave a loud cry and woke, and lo! he was in his own chamber, and through the window he saw the great honey-coloured moon hanging in the dusky air.

And he fell asleep again and dreamed, and this was his dream.

He thought that he was lying on the deck of a huge galley that was being rowed by a hundred slaves. On a carpet by his side the master of the galley was seated. He was black as ebony, and his turban was of crimson silk. Great earrings of silver dragged down the thick lobes of his ears, and in his hands he had a pair of ivory scales.

The slaves were naked, but for a ragged loincloth, and each man was chained to his neighbour. The hot sun beat brightly upon them, and the negroes ran up and down the gangway and lashed them with whips of hide. They stretched out their lean arms and pulled the heavy oars through the water. The salt spray flew from the blades.

At last they reached a little bay, and began to take soundings. A light wind blew from the shore, and covered the deck and the great sail with a fine red dust. Three Arabs mounted on wild asses rode out and threw spears at them. The master of the galley took a painted bow in his hand and shot one of them in the throat. He fell heavily into the surf, and his companions galloped away. A woman wrapped in a yellow veil followed slowly on a camel, looking back now and then at the dead body.

As soon as they had cast anchor and hauled down the sail, the negroes went into the hold and brought up a long rope-ladder, heavily weighted with lead. The master of the galley threw it over the side, making the ends fast to two iron

stanchions. Then the negroes seized the youngest of the slaves, and tied a big stone round his waist. He crept wearily down the ladder, and disappeared into the sea. A few bubbles rose where he sank. Some of the other slaves peered curiously over the side. At the prow of the galley sat a shark-charmer, beating monotonously upon a drum.

After some time the diver rose up out of the water, and clung panting to the ladder with a pearl in his right hand. The negroes seized it from him, and thrust him back. The slaves fell asleep over their oars.

Again and again he came up, and each time that he did so he brought with him a beautiful pearl. The master of the galley weighed them, and put them into a little bag of green leather.

The young King tried to speak, but his tongue seemed to cleave to the roof of his mouth, and his lips refused to move. The negroes chattered to each other, and began to quarrel over a string of bright beads. Two cranes flew round and round the vessel.

Then the diver came up for the last time, and the pearl that he brought with him was fairer than all the pearls of Ormuz, for it was shaped like the full moon, and whiter than the morning star. But his face was strangely pale, and as he fell upon the deck the blood gushed from his ears and nostrils. He quivered for a little, and then he was still. The negroes shrugged their shoulders, and threw the body overboard.

And the master of the galley laughed, and, reaching out, he took the pearl, and when he saw it he pressed it to his forehead and bowed. "It shall be," he said, "for the sceptre of the young King," and he made a sign to the negroes to draw up the anchor.

And when the young King heard this he gave a great cry,

and woke, and through the window he saw the long grey fingers of the dawn clutching at the fading stars.

And he fell asleep again, and dreamed, and this was his dream.

He thought that he was wandering through a dim wood, hung with strange fruits and with beautiful poisonous flowers. The adders hissed at him as he went by, and the bright parrots flew screaming from branch to branch. Huge tortoises lay asleep upon the hot mud. The trees were full of apes and peacocks.

On and on he went, till he reached the outskirts of the wood, and there he saw an immense multitude of men toiling in the bed of a dried-up river. They swarmed up the crag like ants. They dug deep pits in the ground and went down into them. Some of them cleft the rocks with great axes; others grabbed in the sand. They tore up the cactus by its roots, and trampled on the scarlet blossoms. They hurried about, calling to each other, and no man was idle.

From the darkness of a cavern Death and Avarice watched them, and Death said, "I am weary; give me a third of them and let me go."

But Avarice shook her head. "They are my servants," she answered.

And Death said to her, "What hast thou in thy hand?"

"I have three grains of corn," she answered; "what is that to thee?"

"Give me one of them," cried Death, "to plant in my garden; only one of them, and I will go away."

"I will not give thee anything," said Avarice, and she hid her hand in the fold of her raiment.

And Death laughed, and took a cup, and dipped it into a pool of water, and out of the cup rose Ague. She passed

through the great multitude, and a third of them lay dead. A cold mist followed her, and the water-snakes ran by her side.

And when Avarice saw that a third of the multitude was dead she beat her breast and wept. She beat her barren bosom, and cried aloud. "Thou hast slain a third of my servants," she cried, "get thee gone. There is war in the mountains of Tartary, and the kings of each side are calling to thee. The Afghans have slain the black ox, and are marching to battle. They have beaten upon their shields with their spears, and have put on their helmets of iron. What is my valley to thee, that thou should'st tarry in it? Get thee gone, and come here no more."

"Nay," answered Death, "but till thou hast given me a grain of corn I will not go."

But Avarice shut her hand, and clenched her teeth. "I will not give thee anything," she muttered.

And Death laughed, and took up a black stone, and threw it into the forest, and out of a thicket of wild hemlock came Fever in a robe of flame. She passed through the multitude, and touched them, and each man that she touched died. The grass withered beneath her feet as she walked.

And Avarice shuddered, and put ashes on her head. "Thou art cruel," she cried; "thou art cruel. There is famine in the walled cities of India, and the cisterns of Samarcand have run dry. There is famine in the walled cities of Egypt, and the locusts have come up from the desert. The Nile has not overflowed its banks, and the priests have cursed Isis and Osiris. Get thee gone to those who need thee, and leave me my servants."

"Nay," answered Death, "but till thou hast given me a grain of corn I will not go."

"I will not give thee anything," said Avarice.

And Death laughed again, and he whistled through his fingers, and a woman came flying through the air. Plague was written upon her forehead, and a crowd of lean vultures wheeled round her. She covered the valley with her wings, and no man was left alive.

And Avarice fled shrieking through the forest, and Death leaped upon his red horse and galloped away, and his galloping was faster than the wind.

And out of the slime at the bottom of the valley crept dragons and horrible things with scales, and the jackals came trotting along the sand, sniffing up the air with their nostrils.

And the young King wept, and said: "Who were these men, and for what were they seeking?"

"For rubies for a king's crown," answered one who stood behind him.

And the young King started, and, turning round, he saw a man habited as a pilgrim and holding in his hand a mirror of silver.

And he grew pale, and said: "For what king?"

And the pilgrim answered: "Look in this mirror, and thou shalt see him."

And he looked in the mirror, and, seeing his own face, he gave a great cry and woke, and the bright sunlight was streaming into the room, and from the trees of the garden the birds were singing.

And the Chamberlain and the high officers of State came in and made obeisance to him, and the pages brought him the robe of tissued gold, and set the crown and the sceptre before him.

And the young King looked at them, and they were beautiful. More beautiful were they than aught that he had ever seen. But he remembered his dreams, and he said to his

lords; "Take these things away, for I will not wear them."

And the courtiers were amazed, and some of them laughed, for they thought that he was jesting.

But he spake sternly to them again, and said: "Take these things away, and hide them from me. Though it be the day of my coronation, I will not wear them. For on the loom of Sorrow, and by the white hands of Pain, has this my robe been woven. There is Blood in the heart of the ruby, and Death in the heart of the pearl." And he told them his three dreams.

And when the courtiers heard them they looked at each other and whispered, saying: "Surely he is mad; for what is a dream but a dream, and a vision but a vision? They are not real things that one should heed them. And what have we to do with the lives of those who toil for us? Shall a man not eat bread till he has seen the sower, nor drink wine till he has talked with the vinedresser?"

And the Chamberlain spake to the young King, and said, "My lord, I pray thee set aside these black thoughts of thine, and put on this fair robe, and set this crown upon thy head. For how shall the people know that thou art a king, if thou hast not a king's raiment?"

And the young King looked at him. "Is it so, indeed?" he questioned. "Will they not know me for a king if I have not a king's raiment?"

"They will not know thee, my lord," cried the Chamberlain.

"I had thought that there had been men who were kinglike," he answered, "but it may be as thou sayest. And yet I will not wear this robe, nor will I be crowned with this crown, but even as I came to the palace so will I go forth from it."

And he bade them all leave him, save one page whom he

kept as his companion, a lad a year younger than himself. Him he kept for his service, and when he had bathed himself in clear water, he opened a great painted chest, and from it he took the leathern tunic and rough sheepskin cloak that he had worn when he had watched on the hillside the shaggy goats of the goatherd. These he put on, and in his hand he took his rude shepherd's staff.

And the little page opened his big blue eyes in wonder, and said smiling to him, "My lord, I see thy robe and thy sceptre, but where is thy crown?"

And the young King plucked a spray of wild briar that was climbing over the balcony, and bent it, and made a circlet of it, and set it on his own head.

"This shall be my crown," he answered.

And thus attired he passed out of his chamber into the Great Hall, where the nobles were waiting for him.

And the nobles made merry, and some of them cried out to him, "My lord, the people wait for their king, and thou showest them a beggar," and others were wrath and said, "He brings shame upon our state, and is unworthy to be our master." But he answered them not a word, but passed on, and went down the bright porphyry staircase, and out through the gates of bronze, and mounted upon his horse, and rode towards the cathedral, the little page running beside him.

And the people laughed and said, "It is the King's fool who is riding by," and they mocked him.

And he drew rein and said, "Nay, but I am the King." And he told them his three dreams.

And a man came out of the crowd and spake bitterly to him, and said, "Sir, knowest thou not that out of the luxury of the rich cometh the life of the poor? By your pomp we are nurtured, and your vices give us bread. To toil for a hard

master is bitter, but to have no master to toil for is more bitter still. Thinkest thou that the ravens will feed us? And what cure hast thou for these things? Wilt thou say to the buyer, 'Thou shalt buy for so much,' and to the seller, 'Thou shalt sell at this price?' I trow not. Therefore go back to thy Palace and put on thy purple and fine linen. What hast thou to do with us, and what we suffer?"

"Are not the rich and the poor brothers?" asked the young King.

"Aye," answered the man, "and the name of the rich brother is Cain."

And the young King's eyes filled with tears, and he rode on through the murmurs of the people, and the little page grew afraid and left him.

And when he reached the great portal of the cathedral, the soldiers thrust their halberts out and said, "What dost thou seek here? None enters by this door but the King."

And his face flushed with anger, and he said to them, "I am the King," and waved their halberts aside and passed in.

And when the old Bishop saw him coming in his goatherd's dress, he rose up in wonder from his throne, and went to meet him, and said to him, "My son, is this a king's apparel? And with what crown shall I crown thee, and what sceptre shall I place in thy hand? Surely this should be to thee a day of joy, and not a day of abasement."

"Shall Joy wear what Grief has fashioned?" said the young King. And he told him his three dreams.

And when the Bishop had heard them he knit his brows, and said, "My son, I am an old man, and in the winter of my days, and I know that many evil things are done in the wide world. The fierce robbers come down from the mountains, and carry off the little children, and sell them to

the Moors. The lions lie in wait for the caravans, and leap upon the camels. The wild boar roots up the corn in the valley, and the foxes gnaw the vines upon the hill. The pirates lay waste the sea-coast and burn the ships of the fishermen, and take their nets from them. In the salt-marshes live the lepers; they have houses of wattled reeds, and none may come nigh them. The beggars wander through the cities, and eat their food with the dogs. Canst thou make these things not to be? Wilt thou take the leper for thy bedfellow, and set the beggar at thy board? Shall the lion do thy bidding, and the wild boar obey thee? Is not He who made misery wiser than thou art? Wherefore I praise thee not for this that thou hast done, but I bid thee ride back to the Palace and make thy face glad, and put on the raiment that beseemeth a king, and with the crown of gold I will crown thee, and the sceptre of pearl will I place in thy hand. And as for thy dreams, think no more of them. The burden of this world is too great for one man to bear, and the world's sorrow too heavy for one heart to suffer."

"Sayest thou that in this house?" said the young King, and he strode past the Bishop, and climbed up the steps of the altar, and stood before the image of Christ.

He stood before the image of Christ, and on his right hand and on his left were the marvellous vessels of gold, the chalice with the yellow wine, and the vial with the holy oil. He knelt before the image of Christ, and the great candles burned brightly by the jewelled shrine, and the smoke of the incense curled in thin blue wreaths through the dome. He bowed his head in prayer, and the priests in their stiff copes crept away from the altar.

And suddenly a wild tumult came from the street outside, and in entered the nobles with drawn swords and nodding

plumes, and shields of polished steel. "Where is this dreamer of dreams?" they cried. "Where is this King, who is apparelled like a beggar—this boy who brings shame upon our state? Surely we will slay him, for he is unworthy to rule over us."

And the young King bowed his head again, and prayed, and when he had finished his prayer he rose up, and turning round he looked at them sadly.

And lo! through the painted windows came the sunlight streaming upon him, and the sunbeams wove round him a tissued robe that was fairer than the robe that had been fashioned for his pleasure. The dead staff blossomed, and bare lilies that were whiter than pearls. The dry thorn blossomed, and bare roses that were redder than rubies. Whiter than fine pearls were the lilies, and their stems were of bright silver. Redder than male rubies were the roses, and their leaves were of beaten gold.

He stood there in the raiment of a king, and the gates of the jewelled shrine flew open, and from the crystal of the many-rayed monstrance shone a marvellous and mystical light. He stood there in a king's raiment, and the Glory of God filled the place, and the saints in their carven niches seemed to move. In the fair raiment of a king he stood before them, and the organ pealed out its music, and the trumpeters blew upon their trumpets, and the singing boys sang.

And the people fell upon their knees in awe, and the nobles sheathed their swords and did homage, and the Bishop's face grew pale, and his hands trembled. "A greater than I hath crowned thee," he cried, and he knelt before him.

And the young King came down from the high altar, and passed home through the midst of the people. But no man dared look upon his face, for it was like the face of an angel.

Lawley Road

R K Narayan

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

R K Narayan was born on October 10, 1906 in Chennai. He spent a major part of his early childhood in his grandmother's house. Later on, the family moved to Mysore. Narayan started off by writing for *The Merry Magazine* and *The Hindu*, where he eventually obtained a weekly slot in the Sunday edition. Narayan married Rajam in Coimbatore on July 1, 1934 but unfortunately, his wife died in 1939. Their only daughter Hemavati was born in March 1936. It took a long time for Narayan to start writing again. Narayan wrote more than 15 novels, including many based in the fictional southern Indian town of Malgudi. His writing portrayed daily life in India with great sensitivity.

His first novel, *Swami and His Friends*, which began the Malgudi saga, was published in 1935.

The Guide won Narayan the country's highest literary award. The strength of his writing style lay in its simplicity and unpretentiousness. Even the struggles of the common man were depicted with ironic humour and compassion. R K Narayan died at the age of 94.

ABOUT THE STORY

'Lawley Road' reveals R K Narayan's humour at its best. We tend to laugh at the government's lack of knowledge of history. A poor statue is at first condemned and then glorified, when people come to know that Sir Lawley had actually helped Indians during the British Raj.

The Talkative Man said:

For years people were not aware of the existence of a Municipality in Malgudi. The town was none the worse for it. Diseases, if they started, ran their course and disappeared, for even diseases must end someday. Dust and rubbish were blown away by the wind out of sight; drains ebbed and flowed and generally looked after themselves. The Municipality kept itself in the background, and remained so till the country got its independence on the fifteenth of August 1947. History holds few records of such jubilation as was witnessed on that day from the Himalayas to Cape Comorin. Our Municipal Council caught the inspiration. They swept the streets, cleaned the drains and hoisted flags all over the place. Their hearts warmed up when a procession with flags and music passed through their streets.

The Municipal Chairman looked down benignly from his balcony, muttering, "We have done our bit for this great occasion." I believe one or two members of the Council who were with him saw tears in his eyes. He was a man who had done well for himself as a supplier of blankets to the army during the war, later spending a great deal of his gains in securing the chairmanship. That's an epic by itself and does not concern us now. My present story is different. The satisfaction the Chairman now felt was, however, short-lived. In about a week, when the bunting was torn off, he became quite dispirited. I used to visit him almost every day, trying to make a living out of news-reports to an upcountry paper which paid me two rupees for every inch of published news. Every month I could measure out about ten inches of news in that paper, which was mostly a somewhat idealized account of municipal affairs. This made me a great favourite there. I walked in and out of the Municipal Chairman's office

constantly. Now he looked so unhappy that I was forced to ask, "What is wrong, Mr Chairman?"

"I feel we have not done enough," he replied.

"Enough of what?" I asked.

"Nothing to mark off the great event." He sat brooding and then announced, "Come what may, I am going to do something great!" He called up an Extraordinary Meeting of the Council, and harangued them, and at once they decided to nationalize the names of all the streets and parks, in honour of the birth of independence. They made a start with the park at the Market Square. It used to be called the Coronation Park—whose coronation God alone knew; it might have been the coronation of Victoria or of Ashoka. No one bothered about it. Now the old board was uprooted and lay on the lawn, and a brand-new sign stood in its place declaring it henceforth to be Hamara Hindustan Park.

The other transformation, however, could not be so smoothly worked out. Mahatma Gandhi Road was the most sought-after name. Eight different ward councillors were after it. There were six others who wanted to call the roads in front of their houses Nehru Road or Netaji Subash Bose Road. Tempers were rising and I feared they might come to blows. There came a point when, I believe, the Council just went mad. It decided to give the same name to four different streets. Well, sir, even in the most democratic or patriotic town it is not feasible to have two roads bearing the same name. The result was seen within a fortnight. The town became unrecognizable with new names. Gone were the Market Road, North Road, Chitra Road, Vinayak Mudali Street and so on. In their place appeared the names, repeated in four different places, of all the ministers, deputy ministers and the members of the Congress Working Committee. Of course, it

created a lot of hardships—letters went where they were not wanted, people were not able to say where they lived or direct others there. The town became a wilderness with all its landmarks gone.

The Chairman was gratified with his inspired work—but not for long. He became restless again and looked for fresh fields of action. At the corner of Lawley Extension and Market Road there used to be a statue. People had got so used to it that they never bothered to ask whose it was or even to look up. It was generally used by the birds as a perch. The Chairman suddenly remembered that it was the statue of Sir Frederick Lawley. The Extension had been named after him. Now it was changed to Gandhi Nagar, and it seemed impossible to keep Lawley's statue there any longer. The Council unanimously resolved to remove it. The Council with the Chairman sallied forth triumphantly next morning and circumambulated the statue. They now realized their mistake. The statue towered twenty feet above them and seemed to arise from a pedestal of molten lead. In their imagination they had thought that a vigorous resolution would be enough to topple down the statue of this satrap, but now they found that it stood with the firmness of a mountain. They realized that Britain, when she was here, had attempted to raise herself on no mean foundation. But it made them only firmer in their resolve. If it was going to mean blasting up that part of the town for the purpose, they would do it. For they unearthed a lot of history about Sir Frederick Lawley. He was a combination of Attila, the Scourge of Europe, and Nadir Shah, with the craftiness of a Machiavelli. He subjugated Indians with the sword and razed to the ground the villages from which he heard the slightest murmur of protest. He never countenanced Indians except when they approached

him on their knees.

People dropped their normal occupations and loitered around the statue, wondering how they could have tolerated it for so many years. The gentleman seemed to smile derisively at the nation now, with his arms locked behind and his sword dangling from his belt. There could be no doubt that he must have been the worst tyrant imaginable; the true picture—with breeches and wig and white waistcoat and the hard, determined look—of all that has been hatefully familiar in the British period of Indian history. They shuddered when they thought of the fate of their ancestors who had to bear the tyrannies of this man.

Next the Municipality called for tenders. A dozen contractors sent in their estimates, the lowest standing at fifty thousand rupees, for removing the statue and carting it to the Municipal Office, where they were already worried about the housing of it. The chairman thought it over and told me, "Why don't you take it yourself? I will give you the statue free if you do not charge us anything for removing it." I had thought till then that only my municipal friends were mad, but now I found I could be just as mad as they. I began to calculate the whole affair as a pure investment. Suppose it cost me five thousand rupees to dislodge and move the statue (I knew the contractors were overestimating), and I sold it as metal for six thousand . . . About three tons of metal might fetch anything. Or I could probably sell it to the British Museum of Westminster Abbey. I saw myself throwing up the upcountry paper job.

The Council had no difficulty in passing a resolution permitting me to take the statue away. I made elaborate arrangements for the task . . . I borrowed money from my father-in-law, promising him a fantastic rate of interest. I

recruited a team of fifty coolies to hack the pedestal. I stood over them like a slave-driver and kept shouting instructions. They put down their implements at six in the evening and returned to their attack early next day. They were specially recruited from Koppal, where the men's limbs were hardened by generations of teak-cutting in Mempi Forests.

We hacked for ten days. No doubt we succeeded in chipping the pedestal here and there, but that was all; the statue showed no sign of moving. At this rate I feared I might become bankrupt in a fortnight. I received permission from the district Magistrate to acquire a few sticks of dynamite, cordoned off the area and lighted the fuse. I bought down the knight from his pedestal without injuring any limb. Then it took me three days to reach the house with my booty. It was stretched out on a specially designed carriage drawn by several bullocks. The confusion brought about by my passage along Market Road, the crowd that followed uttering jokes, the incessant shouting and instructions I had to be giving, the blinding heat of the day, Sir F's carriage coming to a halt at every inconvenient spot and angle, moving neither forwards nor backwards, holding up the traffic on all sides, and darkness coming on suddenly with the statue nowhere near my home—all this was a nightmare I wished to pass over. I mounted guard over him on the roadside at night. As he lay on his back staring at the stars, I felt sorry for him and said, "Well, this is what you get for being such a haughty imperialist. It never pays."

In due course, he was safely lodged in my small house. His head and shoulders were in my front hall, and the rest of him stretched out into the street through the doorway. It was an obliging community there at Kabir Lane and nobody minded this obstruction.

The Municipal Council passed a resolution thanking me for my services. I wired this news to my paper, tacking onto it a ten-inch story about the statue. A week later the Chairman came to my house in a state of agitation. I seated him on the chest of the tyrant. He said, "I have bad news for you. I wish you had not sent up that news item about the statue. See these . . ." He held out a sheaf of telegrams. They were from every kind of historical society in India, all protesting against the removal of the statue. We had all been misled about Sir F. All the present history pertained to a different Lawley of the time of Warren Hastings. This Frederick Lawley (of the statue) was a military governor who had settled down here after the Mutiny. He cleared the jungles and almost built the town of Malgudi. He established here the first cooperative society for the whole of India, and the first canal system by which thousands of acres of land were irrigated from the Sarayu, which had been dissipating itself till then. He established this, he established that, and he died in the great Sarayu floods while attempting to save the lives of villagers living on its banks. He was the first Englishman to advise the British Parliament to involve more and more Indians in all Indian affairs. In one of his despatches he was said to have declared, "Britain must quit India someday for her own good."

The Chairman said, "The government has ordered us to reinstate the statue." "Impossible!" I cried. "This is my statue and I will keep it. I like to collect statues of national heroes." This heroic sentiment impressed no one. Within a week all the newspapers in the country were full of Sir Frederick Lawley. The public caught the enthusiasm. They paraded in front of my house, shouting slogans. They demanded the statue back. I offered to abandon it if the Municipality at least paid my expenses in bringing it here. The public viewed me

as their enemy. "This man is trying to black-market even a statue," they remarked. Stung by it, I wrote a placard and hung it on my door: Statue for Sale. Two and a half tons of excellent metal. Ideal gift for a patriotic friend. Offers above ten thousand will be considered. It infuriated them and made them want to kick me, but they had been brought up in a tradition of non-violence and so they picketed my house; they lay across my door in relays holding a flag and shouting slogans. I had sent away my wife and children to the village in order to make room for the statue in my house, and so this picketing did not bother me—only I had to use the back door a great deal. The Municipality sent me a notice of prosecution under the Ancient Monuments Act which I repudiated in suitable terms. We were getting into bewildering legalities—a battle of wits between me and the municipal lawyer. The only nuisance about it was that an abnormal quantity of correspondence developed and choked up an already congested household.

I clung to my statue, secretly despairing how the matter was ever going to end. I longed to be able to stretch myself fully in my own house.

Six months later relief came. The government demanded a report from the Municipality on the question of the statue, and this together with other lapses on the part of the Municipality made them want to know why the existing Council should not be dissolved and re-elections ordered. I called on the Chairman and said, "You will have to do something grand now. Why not acquire my house as a National Trust?"

"Why should I?" he asked.

"Because," I said, "Sir F is there. You will never be able to cart him to his old place. It'll be a waste of public money.

Why not put him up where he is now? He has stayed in the other place too long. I'm prepared to give you my house for a reasonable price."

"But our funds don't permit it," he wailed.

"I'm sure you have enough funds of your own. Why should you depend on the municipal funds? It'll indeed be a grand gesture on your part, unique in India . . ." I suggested he ought to relieve himself of some of his old blanket gains. "After all how much more you will have to spend if you have to fight another election!" It appealed to him. We arrived at a figure. He was very happy when he saw in the papers a few days later: "The Chairman of Malgudi Municipality has been able to buy back as a present for the nation the statue of Sir Frederick Lawley. He proposed to install it in a newly acquired property which is shortly to be converted into a park. The Municipal council have resolved that Kabir Lane shall be changed to Lawley Road."

Too Bad!

Isaac Asimov

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Isaac Asimov was born on January 2, 1920 in Russia. He moved from Russia to Brooklyn with his parents at the age of three. Asimov's father made his living through candy stores in Brooklyn. Asimov was exposed to a lot of science fiction as a young boy and he started his writing career by penning fan letters and critiques to the pulp magazines of the 1930s. Asimov graduated from Columbia with a B.S. in Chemistry in 1939. He earned his Ph.D. in Biochemistry in May 1948.

Asimov became a professor in Biochemistry at Boston University School of Medicine. Asimov later chose to be a writer of science fiction, detective fiction and non-fiction. In 1987 he won the Grand Master Award for a lifetime's achievement in science fiction. Some of Asimov's works include *In Memory Yet Green* and *In Joy Still felt. Yours, Isaac Asimov*, is a collection of excerpts from letters he had written over the years. They provide a deep insight into Asimov's personal and professional life. In addition, the three Opus books (*Opus 100*, *Opus 200*, and *Opus 300*), *The Early Asimov*, and *Before the Golden Age* contain substantial autobiographical material.

ABOUT THE STORY

Isaac Asimov's short story 'Too Bad' is not just a modern science fiction story with machines and robots. It shows that science is compatible with humanity, when Mike, a robot gives up his 'life' to save his creator's.

THE THREE LAWS OF ROBOTICS

- ◆ A robot may not injure a human being or through inaction, allow a human being to come to harm.
- ◆ A robot must obey the orders given it by human beings except where that would conflict with the First Law.
- ◆ A robot must protect its own existence as long as such protection does not conflict with the First or Second Law.

Gregory Arnfeld was not actually dying, but certainly there was a sharp limit to how long he might live. He had inoperable cancer and he had refused, strenuously, all suggestions of chemical treatment or of radiation therapy.

He smiled at his wife as he lay propped up against the pillows and said, "I'm the perfect case. Tertia and Mike will handle it."

Tertia did not smile. She looked dreadfully concerned. "There are so many things that can be done, Gregory. Surely Mike is a last resort. You may not need it."

"No, no. By the time they're done drenching me with chemicals and dowsing me with radiation, I would be so far gone that it wouldn't be a reasonable test . . . And please don't call Mike 'it'."

"This is the twenty-second century, Greg. There are so many ways of handling cancer."

"Yes but Mike is one of them, and I think the best. This is the twenty-second century, and we know what robots can do. Certainly, I know. I had more to do with Mike than anyone else. You know that."

"But you can't want to use him just out of pride of design. Besides, how certain are you of miniaturization? That's an even newer technique than robotics."

Arnfeld nodded. "Granted, Tertia. But the miniaturization boys seem confident. They can reduce or restore Planck's

constant in what they say is a reasonably foolproof manner, and the controls that make that possible are built into Mike. He can make himself smaller or larger at will without affecting his surroundings."

"Reasonably foolproof," said Tertia with soft bitterness.

"That's all anyone can ask for, surely. Think of it, Tertia. I am privileged to be part of the experiment. I'll go down in history as the principal designer of Mike, but that will be secondary. My greatest feat will be that of having been successfully treated by a minirobot—by my own choice, by my own initiative."

"You know it's dangerous."

"There's danger to everything. Chemicals and radiation have their side effects. They can slow without stopping. They can allow me to live a wearying sort of half-life. And doing nothing will certainly kill me. If Mike does his job properly, I shall be completely healthy, and if it recurs"—Arnfeld smiled joyously—"Mike can recur as well."

He put out his hand to grasp hers. "Tertia, we've known this was coming, you and I. Let's make something out of this—a glorious experiment. Even if it fails—and it won't fail—it will be a glorious experiment."

Louis Secundo, of the miniaturization group, said, "No, Mrs Arnfeld. We can't guarantee success. Miniaturization is intimately involved with quantum mechanics, and there is a strong element of the unpredictable there. As MIK-27 reduces his size, there is always the chance that a sudden unplanned re-expansion will take place, naturally killing the—the patient. The greater the reduction in size, the tinier the robot becomes, the greater the chance of re-expansion. And once he starts expanding again, the chance of a sudden accelerated burst is even higher. The re-expansion is the really dangerous part."

Tertia shook her head. "Do you think it will happen?"

"The chances are it won't, Mrs Arnfeld. But the chance is never zero. You must understand that."

"Does Dr Arnfeld understand that?"

"Certainly. We have discussed this in detail. He feels that the circumstances warrant the risk." He hesitated. "So do we. I know that you'll see we're not all running the risk but a few of us will be, and we nevertheless feel the experiment to be worthwhile. More important, Dr Arnfeld does."

"What if Mike makes a mistake or reduces himself too far because of a glitch in the mechanism? Then re-expansion would be certain, wouldn't it?"

"It never becomes quite certain. It remains statistical. The chances improve if he gets too small. But then the smaller he gets, the less massive he is, and at some critical point, mass will become so insignificant that the least effort on his part will send him flying off at nearly the speed of light."

"Well, won't that kill the doctor?"

"No. By that time, Mike would be so small he would slip between the atoms of the doctor's body without affecting them."

"But how likely would it be that he would re-expand when he's that small?"

"When MIK-27 approaches neutrino size, so to speak, his half-life would be in the neighbourhood of seconds. That is the chances are fifty-fifty that he would re-expand within seconds but by the time he re-expanded, he would be a hundred thousand miles away in outer space and the explosion that resulted would merely produce a small burst of gamma rays for the astronomers to puzzle over. Still, none of that will happen. MIK-27 will have his instructions and he will reduce himself to no smaller than he will need to be to carry out his

mission."

Mrs Arnfeld knew she would have to face the press one way or another. She had adamantly refused to appear on holovision, and the right-to-privacy provision of the World Charter protected her. On the other hand, she could not refuse to answer questions on a voice-over basis. The right-to-know provision would not allow a blanket blackout.

She sat stiffly, while the young woman facing her said, "Aside from all that, Mrs Arnfeld, isn't it a rather weird coincidence that your husband, chief designer of Mike the Microbot, should also be its first patient?"

"Not at all, Miss Roth," said Mrs Arnfeld wearily. "The doctor's condition is the result of a predisposition. There have been others in his family who have had it. He told me of it when we married, so I was in no way deceived in the matter, and it was for that reason that we have had no children. It is also for that reason that my husband chose his lifework and laboured so assiduously to produce a robot capable of miniaturization. He always felt he would be its patient eventually, you see."

Mrs Arnfeld insisted on interviewing Mike and, under the circumstances, that could not be denied. Ben Johannes, who had worked with her husband for five years and whom she knew well enough to be on first-name terms with, brought her into the robot's quarters.

Mrs Arnfeld had seen Mike soon after his construction, when he was being put through his primary test, and he remembered her. He said, in his curiously neutral voice, too smoothly average to be quite human, "I am pleased to see you, Mrs Arnfeld."

He was not a well-shaped robot. He looked pinheaded and very bottom heavy. He was almost conical, point upward.

Mrs Arnfeld knew that was because his miniaturization mechanism was bulky and abdominal and because his brain had to be abdominal as well in order to increase the speed of response. It was an unnecessary anthropomorphism to insist on a brain behind a tall cranium, her husband had explained. Yet it made Mike seem ridiculous, almost moronic. There were psychological advantages to anthropomorphism, Mrs Arnfeld thought, uneasily.

"Are you sure you understand your task, Mike?" said Mrs Arnfeld.

"Completely, Mrs Arnfeld," said Mike. "I will see to it that every vestige of cancer is removed."

Johannes said, "I'm not sure if Gregory explained it, but Mike can easily recognize a cancer cell when he is at the proper size. The difference is unmistakable, and he can quickly destroy the nucleus of any cell that is not normal."

"I am laser equipped, Mrs Arnfeld," said Mike, with an odd air of unexpressed pride.

"Yes, but there are millions of cancer cells all over. It would take how long to get them, one by one?"

"Not quite necessarily one by one, Tertia," said Johannes. "Even though the cancer is widespread, it exists in clumps. Mike is equipped to burn off and close capillaries leading to the clump, and a million cells could die at a stroke in that fashion. He will only occasionally have to deal with cells on an individual basis."

"Still, how long would it take?"

Johannes's youngish face went into a grimace as though it were difficult to decide what to say. "It could take hours, Tertia, if we're to do a thorough job. I admit that."

"And every moment of those hours will increase the chance of re-expansion."

Mike said, "Mrs Arnfeld, I will labour to prevent re-expansion."

Mrs Arnfeld turned to the robot and said earnestly, "Can you, Mike? I mean, is it possible for you to prevent it?"

"Not entirely, Mrs Arnfeld. By monitoring my size and making an effort to keep it constant, I can minimize the random changes that might lead to a re-expansion. Naturally, it is almost impossible to do this when I am actually re-expanding under controlled conditions."

"Yes, I know. My husband has told me that re-expansion is the most dangerous time. But you will try, Mike? Please?"

"The laws of robotics ensure that I will, Mrs Arnfeld," said Mike solemnly.

As they left, Johannes said in what Mrs Arnfeld understood to be an attempt at reassurance, "Really, Tertia, we have a holo-sonogram and a detailed cat scan of the area. Mike knows the precise location of every significant cancerous lesion. Most of his time will be spent searching for small lesions undetectable by instruments, but that can't be helped. We must get them all, if we can, you see, and that takes time. Mike is strictly instructed, however, as to how small to get, and he will get no smaller, you can be sure. A robot must obey orders."

"And the re-expansion, Ben?"

"There, Tertia, we're in the lap of the quanta. There is no way of predicting, but there is a more than reasonable chance that he will get out without trouble. Naturally, we will have him reexpand within Gregory's body as little as possible—just enough to make us reasonably certain we can find and extract him. He will then be rushed to the safe room where the rest of the re-expansion will take place.

Please, Tertia, even ordinary medical procedures have

their risks.”

Mrs Arnfeld was in the observation room as the miniaturization of Mike took place. So were the holovision cameras and selected media representatives. The importance of the medical experiment made it impossible to prevent that, but Mrs Arnfeld was in a niche with only Johannes for company, and it was understood that she was not to be approached for comment, particularly if anything untoward occurred.

Untoward! A full and sudden re-expansion would blow up the entire operating room and kill every person in it. It was not for nothing the observation room was underground and half a mile away from the viewing room.

It gave Mrs Arnfeld a somewhat grisly sense of assurance that the three miniaturists who were working on the procedure (so calmly, it would seem—so calmly) were condemned to death as firmly as her husband was in case of anything untoward. Surely, she could rely on them protecting their own lives to the extreme; they would not, therefore, be cavalier in the protection of her husband.

Eventually, of course, if the procedure were successful, ways would be worked out to perform it in automated fashion, and only the patient would be at risk. Then, perhaps, the patient might be more easily sacrificed through carelessness—but not now, not now. Mrs Arnfeld keenly watched the three, working under imminent sentence of death, for any sign of discomposure.

She watched the miniaturization procedure (she had seen it before) and saw Mike grow smaller and disappear. She watched the elaborate procedure that injected him into the proper place in her husband’s body. (It had been explained to her that it would have been prohibitively expensive to

inject human beings in a submarine device instead. Mike, at least, needed no life-support system.)

Then matters shifted to the screen, in which the appropriate section of the body was shown in holosonogram. It was a three-dimensional representation, cloudy and unfocused, made imprecise through a combination of the finite size of the sound waves and the effects of Brownian motion. It showed Mike dimly and noiselessly making his way through Gregory Arnfeld’s tissues by the way of his bloodstream. It was almost impossible to tell what he was doing, but Johannes described the events to her in a low, satisfied manner, until she could listen to him no more and asked to be led away.

She had been mildly sedated, and she had slept until evening, when Johannes came to see her. She had not been long awake and it took her a moment to gather her faculties. Then she said, in sudden and overwhelming fear, “What has happened?”

Johannes said, hastily, “Success, Tertia. Complete success. Your husband is cured. We can’t stop the cancer from recurring, but for now he is cured.”

She fell back in relief. “Oh, wonderful.”

“Just the same, something unexpected has happened and this will have to be explained to Gregory. We felt that it would be best if you did the explaining.”

“I?” Then, in a renewed access of fear, “What has happened?” Johannes told her.

It was two days before she could see her husband for more than a moment or two. He was sitting up in bed, looking a little pale, but smiling at her.

“A new lease of life, Tertia,” he said buoyantly.

“Indeed, Greg, I was quite wrong. The experiment succeeded and they tell me they can’t find a trace of cancer

in you."

"Well, we can't be too confident about that. There maybe a cancerous cell here and there, but perhaps my immune system will handle it, especially with the proper medication and if it ever builds up again, which might well take years we'll call on Mike again."

At this point, he frowned and said, "You know, I haven't seen Mike."

Mrs Arnfeld maintained a discreet silence.

Arnfeld said, "They've been putting me off."

"You've been weak, dear, and sedated. Mike was poking through your tissues and doing a little necessary destructive work here and there. Even with a successful operation you need time for recovery."

"If I've recovered enough to see you, surely I've recovered enough to see Mike, at least long enough to thank him."

"A robot doesn't need to receive thanks."

"Of course not, but I need to give it. Do me a favour, Tertia. Go out there and tell them I want Mike right away."

Mrs Arnfeld hesitated, then came to a decision. Waiting would make the task harder for everyone. She said carefully, "Actually, dear, Mike is not available."

"Not available! Why not?"

"He had to make a choice, you see. He had cleaned up your tissues marvelously well; he had done a magnificent job, everyone agrees; and then he had to undergo re-expansion. That was the risky part."

"Yes, but here I am. Why are you making a long story out of it?"

"Mike decided to minimize the risk."

"Naturally. What did he do?"

"Well, dear, he decided to make himself smaller."

"What! He couldn't. He was ordered not to."

"That was Second Law, Greg. First Law took precedence. He wanted to make certain your life would be saved. He was equipped to control his own size, so he made himself smaller as rapidly as he could, and when he was far less massive than an electron he used his laser beam, which was by then too tiny to hurt anything in your body, and the recoil sent him flying away at nearly the speed of light. He exploded in outer space. The gamma rays were detected."

Arnfeld stared at her. "You can't mean it. Are you serious? Mike is dead?"

"That's what happened. Mike could not refuse to take an action that might keep you from harm."

"But I didn't want that. I wanted him safe for further work. He wouldn't have re-expanded uncontrollably. He would have gotten out safely."

"He couldn't be sure. He couldn't risk your life, so he sacrificed his own."

"But my life was less important than his."

"Not to me, dear. Not to those who work with you. Not to anyone. Not even to Mike." She put out her hand to him. "Come, Greg, you're alive. You're well. That's all that counts."

But he pushed her hand aside impatiently. "That's not all that counts. You don't understand. Oh, too bad. Too bad!"

The Secret of Culture

Munshi Premchand

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Munshi Premchand was born in 1880 in Benaras. His real name was Nawab Rai or Dhanpat Rai. Premchand was greatly influenced by Mahatma Gandhi. He gave up his job to support Mahatma Gandhi's call for non-cooperation with the British Raj. This led him to take to writing as a full time job. Premchand earned the reputation of being one of India's best writers of Urdu novels and short stories. He was forced to write under the penname of 'Premchand' as his book, *Soz-e-Watan* was banned by the ruling British government. His writing aimed at infusing his readers with the spirit of patriotism and nationalism.

Premchand travelled extensively through small villages and towns. This gave him a clear perspective on the lives and struggles of the ordinary Indian and his stories, novels, and essays are a sensitive reflection of these. Premchand's writing is characterized by its simplicity of style. He wrote in the language of the common man and this is perhaps the reason why his language is a blend of Urdu and Hindi. He was a master of satire and humour. Some of his famous stories include *Zewar ka Dibba*, *Gilli Danda*, *Eidgaah* and *Namak ka Darogha*.

ABOUT THE STORY

Munshi Premchand brings to light social hypocrisy. The portrait of the poor common man caught in the vicious circle of poverty is sketched beautifully through the character of Damri. The so-called cultured, Rai Rattan Kishore, goes scot free even after accepting bribe while Damri gets six months' rigorous imprisonment for 'stealing' a little fodder for his starved buffaloes.

There are many things in life which I do not understand. Why do men shave? Why do educated people invariably always become short-sighted? Is it merely a weakness in the brain or are there other reasons for it? And why do people run after titles?

But at present I am not concerned with any of these things. I am faced with a new problem. What are the signs of culture in a man? Who is cultured and whom shall we call uncouth. At a casual glance the question appears to be simple, simple enough perhaps even for a child to answer. But going deeply into it, it does not remain as easy. Would, for instance, wearing of a jacket and trousers; hat, collar and necktie; eating at a table; drinking tea or coffee the whole day; smoking cigars; be considered the signs of culture? If that were, some one would have to call cultured even the drunken soldiers one comes across going almost zig-zag on the roads, ready to tease the passers-by for no rhyme or reason. Surely they cannot be called cultured. Well, then, culture must be something different, something which has more to do with the mind than with the outward appearance.

Rai Rattan Kishore is one of my many friends. A highly educated man, holding an important office, he is considered to be both kind-hearted and generous. Even in spite of a large salary his expenses are always more than his income. Nearly one-fourth goes off as rent of the bungalow alone. And there are other expenses. The man is often worried. Bribes he does not take; not at least to my knowledge; although some say that he does. Only the travelling expenses are cooked up now and again. Sometimes the amount has to be made up even from other budget heads. When he is asked why he tours so

much, the answer is simple—the work of the district is such that it requires the constant personal attention of the office. He has a way of fudging expenses. His camps are nearly always about fifty miles from the town. The staff remains at the camp and Rai Sahib sits at home and gossips. But who dare suspect his honesty? There is not even the slightest doubt about his being cultured.

One day when I went to call on him he was scolding his mali Damri. Damri is a day and night servant, allowed to get home only to take his food. His home is in a nearby village. Yesterday, for some reason, he did not return at night.

Rai Sahib: "When you are on day and night duty why did you stay at home last night? I shall have to deduct your salary for yesterday."

Damri: "Sarkar I had an unexpected guest and could not return . . ."

Rai Sahib: "Well, in that case, the guest will have to pay you the salary."

Damri: "Oh, kind Sir, I shall never do it again..."

Rai Sahib: "Stop your jabber..."

Damri: "Sir,..."

Rai Sahib: "Alright, this time I shall let you off with a fine of two rupees"

Damri, poor man, had come to apologize for staying away and this was his reward. A fine of two rupees. A fine of two rupees for absenting himself for one night. And nobody bothers about people who earn travelling allowances sitting at home! No one to punish such offenders. Damri also, had he been clever, would have returned to his quarters in the early hours of the morning and nobody would have been any the

wiser where he spent the night. But the man lacked cleverness.

Damri had six biswas of land but there were as many mouths to feed. His two sons, two daughters and the wife, all worked on the land. And yet there was not enough to eat at the day's end. After all it was only six biswas of land. One couldn't expect to dig gold out of it. If they all went out of the village and worked as coolies they would probably have been able to earn more. But how can a farmer bear the insult of being called a coolie? The major part of Damri's pay was spent in feeding the bullocks alone. But all this was preferable to being called a coolie. Undoubtedly Damri worked as a coolie but with two bullocks in front of his house, he was still a farmer.

One day Rai Sahib found him shivering.

"Why don't you get some clothes made, Damri?" he asked.

Damri: "I can hardly provide a square meal for the family, Sarkar."

Rai Sahib: "Why don't you sell off the bullocks?"

Haven't I told you this a number of times? After all why can't you understand even such an elementary thing."

Damri: "Sell off the bullocks, Sir? How will I be able to show my face again in the village? Who will marry my daughters?"

Rai Sahib: "Oh, you fools! With such absurd ideas, is it no wonder that you people are so down-trodden?"

It is a crime to even take pity on you." Then turning towards me : "Well, Munshiji, do you know of any remedy for such madness? The man is dying of cold and yet he must have two bullocks!"

I replied, "It is one's own outlook, really."

Rai Sahib: "Outlook? It is madness. I tell you. Look at me. Every year, for generations, Janam Ashtami used to be celebrated in our household with great pomp and splendour. Hundreds of rupees were spent. There were feasts, presents for relations, clothes for the poor.

The year my father died I put a stop to it all. People said that I had become an atheist. Some even said that I had turned a Christian. But who cares? It all died down eventually. Fancy the absurd situation. If there was a marriage in the town I must provide the wood. So was the tradition since generations. My father even used to buy wood to carry on the tradition. Sheer absurdity. I have put a stop to it all. Naturally there was a lot of hue and cry. But after all I have to look to my pocket. I have saved nearly five hundred rupees a year."

The question again arose in my mind. Which of the two is cultured—the so-called stupid Damri who is ready to sacrifice his life on the altar of family pride and tradition or the rich Rai Rattan Kishore who sacrifices family traditions for the sake of a few pieces of silver?

A very important case came up before Rai Sahib, one day. A rich man of the town had been arrested for murder and his friends were trying all means to get him out on bail. Petitions were sent to Rai Sahib; even recommendations and presents of fruits and flowers. Nothing however was of any avail. And nobody dared broach the subject of a bribe. In sheer desperation, at last, the rich man's wife decided to go to the Rai Sahib's wife.

It was about 10 o'clock at night. The two women were talking. At last an agreement was reached at twenty thousand

rupees. Rai Sahib's wife could not believe her ears. Going in she told Rai Sahib, without much ado, that if he did not accept the money, she would.

Rai Sahib: "Don't be impatient. What will she think of you? Have you no regard for your self-respect? I agree that it is a large sum and can solve a number of our problems but, after all, it is also a question of the prestige of the District Judge. You should have at least feigned offense and asked her to get out."

Wife: "Whom are you advising? Haven't I done that already? Nearly turned her out of the house. But the poor woman put her head on my feet and started crying."

Rai Sahib: "Did you say that even if you so much as mentioned the word bribe to me I would eat you up."

Wife: "I have told her so many of these things but she just won't budge. The poor woman is crying her heart out."

Rai Sahib: "You haven't agreed to accept the money, have you?"

Wife: "Agreed? I have even put it in the box. They are all bank notes."

Rai Sahib: "Oh, you are a fool. I do wish somebody would drill some sense into your head."

Wife: "Too late for it now."

Rai Sahib: "Yes, so it seems. You didn't even ask me before putting the money in the box. If somebody should come to know of it I would be undone."

Wife: "Well, if that's the case please think it over. I can still return it."

Rai Sahib: "O, it's all over and done with now. I shall have to accept the man's bail application. A very dangerous

proposition but still . . . And you know how I hate taking bribes, yet you must get impatient. I must break my vow on account of your stupidity . . .”

Wife: “In that case, I shall go and return the money.”

Rai Sahib : “Don’t be more stupid now.”

As this drama was being enacted in Rai Sahib’s house, Damri was busy cutting the crop in his village headman’s field. He had taken the night leave from Rai Sahib. When he reached home that evening he found that the bullocks had nothing to eat. There were still some days before he would get his pay and there was not even a pie in the house. As soon as the bullocks saw him they started wagging their tails and making mute little sounds of welcome. The long lost master had returned at last and with him had returned their hopes of food. As he went near them they looked at him with pitiable dreamy eyes and started licking his hands. Even a heart of stone would melt before such supplication. Poor Damri was at war with himself. Poverty started gnawing at his sides. With a heavy heart and with tears almost bubbling out of his eyes he moved away into the hut. The matter must wait till tomorrow. Tomorrow he would try and arrange a loan.

About 11 o’clock at night Damri woke up with a start and found that the bullocks were still looking longingly at him. He could bear the sight no longer. How could he let these poor beasts starve—they who were as dear to him as his own sons. Taking out a sickle and a bag he started off to look for fodder. Just outside the village were some fields of Jawar and Bajra. Seeing them he started trembling. No, he would not be a thief. He must not stoop; he would never stoop so low, “But the bullocks are starving” somebody seemed to whisper.

The struggle instantly ceased. The bullocks won.

He must cut just enough to last them the night. Even if someone caught him he would say that his bullocks were starving. Surely no one will punish him for a little fodder. At the most he could demand the price. After all he was not stealing it for selling.

As he was moving out of the field the village policeman passed that way. He was on his way to the local bania’s shop to raid a gambling den. Seeing a man come out of a field with a bag, at that hour of the night, he challenged Damri. Damri was almost dumbfounded. His worst fears had come true. Fumbling for words, he managed to utter “Sarkar I have cut only a little. You can see for yourself. My bullocks are starving.”

Policeman: “Stealing eh! Whose field is this?”

Damri: “Baldev Mehtu’s.”

Policeman: “Come along with me, you thief.” The policeman thought that perhaps now he would be able to add a little more to what he would get from the bania for letting him off. But what had poor Damri to give him? Ultimately he was taken to the police station. A case of theft was registered against him and he was to be produced before Rai Sahib, the next day.

When Rai Sahib saw Damri in the dock, he burst out with anger. “Oh, you rascal, you have brought shame on me. People will say that Rai Sahib’s servants are all thieves. What have you lost? You will get six months’ and live at Government expense. Had you not been my servant, I might have been lenient with you but now I must give you exemplary punishment. I don’t want to hear that Rai Sahib was partial

to his servant." And saying this he sentenced Damri to six months' rigorous imprisonment.

The same day the bail application came up and was granted.

I heard both the stories and was convinced more that ever that culture was merely a second name for cunning. One can do the worst misdeeds but so long as one can hide them, cover them up well, one is a man of culture, a gentleman.

A Lesson on a Tortoise

D H Lawrence

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

David Herbert Lawrence was born in 1885 in Eastwood, a coal-mining town in Nottinghamshire. His parents did not get along well and Lawrence grew very close to his mother, being a great emotional support for her. They were poor and his mother, who had been a schoolteacher, was determined that he should not become a miner like his father. She encouraged him to study. After finishing grammar school, Lawrence attended Nottingham High School. However as he did not excel in school he dropped out and took up clerkship in a surgical appliance factory. Lawrence later received a teaching certificate from University College, Nottingham.

In 1911, he gave up teaching because of his failing health as he suffered from pneumonia. He eloped with Frieda Weekly, the wife of a professor at Nottingham. They travelled across Europe and got married in 1914 after Frieda's divorce. Lawrence's greatest novels include *Women in Love*, *The White Peacock*, *The Trespasser*, *Sons and Lovers* and *The Rainbow*. His writing explored life with an almost brutal honesty. His sensitive yet realistic depiction of the experiences of life led to the popularity of his work. Lawrence died of tuberculosis in 1930 in France.

ABOUT THE STORY

D H Lawrence tends to startle with his writings. In 'A Lesson on a Tortoise' the teacher's most trusted student who is the assistant monitor turns out to be the thief in the class. Lawrence effectively proves that there is more to things than all that meets the eye.

It was the last lesson on Friday afternoon, and this, with Standard VI, was Nature Study from half past three till half past four. The last lesson of the week is a weariness to teachers and scholars. It is the end; there is no need to keep up the tension of discipline and effort any longer, and, yielding to weariness, a teacher is spent.

But Nature Study is a pleasant lesson. I had got a big old tortoise, who had not yet gone to sleep, though November was darkening the early afternoon, and I knew the boys would enjoy sketching him. I put him under the radiator to warm while I went for a large empty shell that I had sawn in two to show the ribs of some ancient tortoise absorbed in his bony coat. When I came back I found Joe, the old reptile, stretching slowly his skinny neck, and looking with indifferent eyes at the two intruding boys who were kneeling beside him. I was too good-tempered to send them out again into the playground, too slack with the great relief of Friday afternoon. So I bade them put out the Nature books ready. I crouched to look at Joey, and stroked his horny, blunt head with my finger. He was quite lively. He spread out his legs and gripped the floor with his flat, hand-like paws, then he slackened again as if from a yawn, drooping his head meditatively.

I felt pleased with myself, knowing that the boys would be delighted with the lesson. "He will not want to walk" I said to myself. "And if he takes a sleepy stride, they'll be just in ecstasy, and I can easily calm him down to his old position." So I anticipated their entry. At the end of playtime I went to bring them in. They were a small class of about thirty, my own boys. A difficult, mixed class, they were, consisting of six Gordon Home boys, five boys from a fairly well-to-do Home for the children of actors, and a set of commoners varying from poor lads who hobbled to school, crippled by broken

enormous boots, to boys who brought soft, light shoes to wear in school on snowy days. The Gordons were a difficult set; you could pick them out: crop haired, coarsely dressed lads, distrustful, always ready to assume the defensive. They would lie till it made my heart sick, if they were charged with offence, but they were willing, and would respond beautifully to an appeal. The actors were of a different fibre: some gentle, a pleasure even to look at; others polite and obedient, but indifferent, covertly insolent and vulgar; all of them more or less gentlemanly.

The boys crowded round the table noisily as soon as they discovered Joe. "Is he alive? Look, his head's coming out! He'll bite you?" "Please Sir, do tortoises bite?" I hurried them off to their seats in a little group in front, and pulled the table up to the desks. Joe kept fairly still. The boys nudged each other excitedly, making half audible remarks concerning the poor reptile, looking quickly from me to Joe and then to their neighbours. I set them sketching, but in their pleasure at the novelty they could not be still:

"Please Sir—shall we draw the marks on the shell? Please Sir, has he only got four toes?" "Toes!" echoes somebody, covertly delighted at the absurdity of calling the grains of claws 'toes'. "Please Sir, he's moving. Please Sir!"

I stroked his neck and calmed him down:

"Now don't make me wish I hadn't brought him. That's enough Miles, you shall go to the back and draw twigs if I hear you again! Enough now, be still, get on with the drawing, it's hard!"

I wanted peace for myself. They began to sketch diligently. I stood and looked across at the sunset, which I could see facing me through my window, a great gold sunset, very large and magnificent, rising up in immense gold beauty beyond

the town, that was become a low dark strip of nothingness under the wonderful up-building of the western sky. The light, the thick, heavy golden sunlight which is only seen in its full dripping splendor in town, spread on the desks and the floor like gold lacquer. I lifted my hands, to take the sunlight on them, smiling faintly to myself, trying to shut my fingers over its tangible richness.

"Please Sir!" I was interrupted. "Please Sir, rubbers?"

The question was rather plaintive. I had said they should have rubbers no more. I could not keep my stock, I could not detect the thief among them, and I was weary of the continual degradation of bullying them to try to recover what was lost among them. But it was Friday afternoon, very peaceful and happy. Like a bad teacher, I went back on my word:

"Well!" I said, indulgently.

My monitor, a pale, bright, erratic boy, went to the cupboard and took out a red box.

"Please Sir!" he cried, then he stopped and counted again in the box. "Eleven! There's only eleven, Sir, and there were fifteen when I put them away on Wednesday—!"

The class stopped, every face upturned. Joe sunk, and lay flat on his shell, his legs limp. Another of the hateful moments had come. The sunset was smeared out, the charm of the afternoon was smashed like a fair glass that falls to the floor. My nerves seemed to tighten, and to vibrate with sudden tension.

"Again!" I cried, turning to the class in passion, to the upturned faces, and the sixty watchful eyes.

"Again! I am sick of it, sick of it I am! A thieving, wretched set!—A skulking, mean lot!" I was quivering with anger and distress.

"Who is it? You must know! You are all as bad as one

another, you hide it—a miserable—!" I looked round the class in great agitation. The Gordons, with their distrustful faces, were noticeable.

"Marples!" I cried to one of them, "where are those rubbers?"

"I don't know where they are: I've never 'ad no rubbers" he almost shouted back, with the usual insolence of his set. I was more angry:

"You must know! They're gone, they don't melt into air, they don't fly. Who took them then? Rawson, do you know anything of them?"

"No Sir!" he cried, with impudent indignation.

"No, you intend to know nothing! Wood, have you any knowledge of these four rubbers?"

"No!" he shouted, with absolute insolence.

"Come here!" I cried, "come here! Fetch the cane, Burton. We'll make an end, insolence and thieving and all."

The boy dragged himself to the front of the class, and stood slackly, almost crouching, glaring at me. The rest of the Gordons sat upright in their desks, like animals of a pack ready to spring. There was tense silence for a moment. Burton handed me the cane, and I turned from the class to Wood. I liked him best among the Gordons.

"Now my lad!" I said "I'll cane you for impudence first."

He turned swiftly to me; tears sprang to his eyes.

"Well" he shouted at me "you always pick on the Gordons you're always on to us—!"

This was so manifestly untrue that my anger fell like a bird shot in a mid flight.

"Why!" I exclaimed, "what a disgraceful untruth! I am always excusing you, letting you off!"

"But you pick on us you—start on us—you pick on Marples,

an' Rawson, an' on me. You always begin with the Gordons."

"Well" I answered, justifying myself. "Isn't it natural? Haven't your boys stolen? Haven't these boys stolen several times and been caught?"

"That doesn't say as we do now," he replied.

"How am I to know? You don't help me. How do I know? Isn't it natural to suspect you?"

"Well, it's not us. We know who it is. Everybody knows who it is, only they won't tell."

"Who knows?" I asked.

"Why Rawson, and Maddock, and Newling, and all of 'em."

I asked these boys if they could tell me. Each one shook his head, and said "No Sir." I went round the class. It was the same. They lied to me, every one.

"You see" I said to Wood.

"Well they won't own up" he said. "I shouldn't 'a done if you hadn't 'a been goin' to cane me."

This frankness was painful, but I preferred it. I made them all sit down. I asked Wood to write his knowledge on a piece of paper, and I promised not to divulge. He would not. I asked the boys he had named, all of them. They refused. I asked them again I appealed to them.

"Let them all do it then!" said Wood. I tore up scraps of paper, and gave each boy one.

"Write on it the name of the boy you suspect. He is a thief and a sneak. He gives endless pain and trouble to us all. It is your duty."

They wrote furtively, and quickly doubled up the papers. I collected them in the lid of the rubber box, and sat at the table to examine them. There was dead silence, they all watched me. Joe had withdrawn into his shell, forgotten.

A few papers were blank; several had 'I suspect nobody'; these I threw in the paper basket; two had the name of an old thief, and these I tore up; eleven bore the name of my assistant monitor, a splendid, handsome boy, one of the oldest of the actors. I remembered how deferential and polite he had been when I had asked him, how ready to make barren suggestions; I remembered his shifty, anxious look during the questioning; I remembered how eager he had been to do things for me before the monitor came in the room. I knew it was he—without remembering.

"Well!" I said, feeling very wretched when I was convicted that the papers were right. "Go on with the drawing."

They were very uneasy and restless, but quiet. From time to time they watched me. Very shortly, the bell rang. I told the two monitors to collect up the things, and I sent the class home. We did not go into prayers. I, and they, were in no mood for hymns and the evening prayer of gratitude.

When the monitors had finished, and I had turned out all the lights but one, I sent home Curwen, and kept my assistant monitor a moment.

"Segar, do you know anything of my rubbers?"

"No Sir"—he had a deep, manly voice, and he spoke with earnest protestation—flushing—

"No? Nor my pencils?—nor my two books?"

"No Sir! I know nothing about the books."

"No? The pencils then—?"

"No Sir! Nothing! I don't know anything about them."

"Nothing, Segar?"

"No Sir."

He hung his head, and looked so humiliated, a fine, handsome lad, that I gave it up. Yet I knew he would be dishonest again, when the opportunity arrived.

"Very well! You will not help as monitor any more. You will not come into the class room, until the class comes in any more. You understand?"

"Yes Sir"—he was very quiet.

"Go along then."

He went out, and silently closed the door. I turned out the last light, tried the cupboards, and went home.

I felt very tired, and very sick. The night had come up, the clouds were moving darkly, and the sordid streets near the school felt like disease in the lamplight.

The Pomegranate Trees

William Saroyan

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

William Saroyan was born in California to Armenian parents. The family moved to New Jersey in 1905. At the age of fifteen, Saroyan left school and decided to become a writer. Saroyan continued his education by reading and writing on his own. He took up various jobs and later became a journalist, living on his writing from 1920. The *Overland Monthly* published a few of his short articles. He gained recognition as an American author whose impressionistic stories celebrated the joy of living in spite of the hardships caused by the Great Depression. Several of Saroyan's works were autobiographical. He wrote about the rootlessness of immigrants. His works celebrated the spirit of freedom, and he perceived kindness and brotherly love as human ideals.

His first collected stories appeared in the 1930s, including *The Broken Wheel*. His greatest success as a writer came in 1934 with *The daring young man on the flying trapeze*, a story of a poor young writer in a depression-ridden society. Among Saroyan's best known works is the play *The Time of your Life*, which won him the Pulitzer Prize. Also popular is his short story collection *My name is Aram*.

ABOUT THE STORY

'The Pomegranate Trees' is a light humorous story in which the uncle of the narrator strives in vain to harvest the pomegranate fruit in an arid desert. The uncle's foolishness is brought to light through the wit and sarcasm of the nephew.

Great ideas germinate in the minds of intensely imaginative people—poets, scientists, philosophers. Nurtured by fortune and a sense of practicality these ideas are transformed into great achievements. When they are, the world knows about it and applauds the architects. The less fortunate are scoffed at as ‘dreamers’. For every dream that bears fruit there are a thousand others that wilt and wither away. Here is a poignant story of such a dream.

My uncle Melik was just about the worst farmer that ever lived. He was too imaginative and poetic for his own good. What he wanted was beauty. He wanted to plant it and see it grow. I myself planted over one hundred pomegranate trees for my uncle one year back there in the good old days of poetry and youth in the world. I drove a John Deere tractor, too, and so did my uncle. It was all pure aesthetics, not agriculture. My uncle just liked the idea of planting trees and watching them grow. Only they wouldn’t grow. It was on account of the soil. The soil was desert soil. It was dry. My uncle waved at the six hundred and eighty acres of desert he had bought and he said in the most poetic Armenian anybody ever heard, “Here in this awful desolation a garden shall flower, fountains of cold water shall bubble out of the earth, and all things of beauty shall come into being.”

“Yes, sir,” I said.

I was the first and only relative to see the land he had bought. He knew I was a poet at heart, and he believed I would understand the magnificent impulse—that was driving him to glorious ruin. I did. I knew as well as he that what he had purchased was worthless desert land. It was away over to hell and gone—, at the foot of the Sierra Nevada Mountains. It was full of every kind of desert plant that ever sprang out of dry, hot earth. It was overrun with prairie dogs, squirrels,

horned toads, snakes, and a variety of smaller forms of life. The space over this land knew only the presence of hawks, eagles, and buzzards. It was a region of loneliness, emptiness, truth, and dignity. It was nature at its proudest, driest, loneliest, and loveliest.

My uncle and I got out of the Ford roadster in the middle of his land and began to walk over the dry earth.

“This land,” he said, “is my land.”

He walked slowly, kicking into the dry soil. A horned toad scrambled over the earth at my uncle’s feet. My uncle clutched my shoulder and came to a pious halt.

“What is that animal?” he said.

“That little tiny lizard?” I said.

“That mouse with horns,” my uncle said. “What is it?”

“I don’t know for sure.” I said. “We call them horny toads.”

The horned toad came to a halt about three feet away and turned its head.

My uncle looked down at the small animal.

“Is it poison?” he said.

“To eat?” I said. “Or if it bites you?”

“Either way,” my uncle said.

“I don’t think it’s good to eat,” I said. “I think it’s harmless. I’ve caught many of them. They grow sad in captivity, but never bite. Shall I catch this one?”

“Please do,” my uncle said.

I sneaked up on the horned toad, then sprang on it while my uncle looked on.

“Careful,” he said. “Are you sure it isn’t poison?”

“I’ve caught many of them,” I said.

I took the horned toad to my uncle. He tried not to seem afraid.

"A lovely little thing, isn't it?" he said. His voice was unsteady.

"Would you like to hold it?" I said.

"No," my uncle said. "You hold it. I have never before been so close to such a thing as this. I see it has eyes. I suppose it can see us."

"I suppose it can," I said. "It's looking up at you now."

My uncle looked the horned toad straight in the eye. The horned toad looked my uncle straight in the eye. For full half a minute they looked one another straight in the eye and then the horned toad turned its head aside and looked down at the ground. My uncle sighed with relief.

"A thousand of them," he said, "could kill a man, I suppose."

"They never travel in great numbers," I said. "You hardly ever see more than one at a time."

"A big one," my uncle said, "could probably bite a man to death."

"They don't grow big," I said. "This is as big as they grow."

"They seem to have an awful eye for such small creatures," my uncle said. "Are you sure they don't mind being picked up?"

"I suppose they forget all about it the minute you put them down," I said.

"Do you really think so?" my uncle said.

"I don't think they have very good memories," I said.

My uncle straightened up, breathing deeply.

"Put the little creature down," he said. "Let us not be cruel to the innocent creations of Almighty God. It is not poison and grows no larger than a mouse and does not travel in great numbers and has no memory to speak of, let the

timid little thing return to the earth. Let us be gentle towards these small things which live on the earth with us."

"Yes, sir," I said.

I placed the horned toad on the ground.

"Gently now," my uncle said. "Let no harm come to this strange dweller on my land."

The horned toad scrambled away.

"These little things," I said, "have been living on soil of this kind for centuries."

"Centuries?" my uncle said. "Are you sure?"

"I'm not sure," I said, "but I imagine they have. They're still here, anyway." My uncle looked around at his land, at the cactus and brush growing out of it, at the sky overhead.

"What have they been eating all this time?" he shouted.

"I don't know," I said.

"What would you say they've been eating?" he said.

"Insects, I guess."

"Insects?" my uncle shouted. "What sort of insects?"

"Little bugs, most likely," I said. "I don't know their names. I can find out tomorrow at school."

We continued to walk over the dry land. When we came to some holes in the earth my uncle stood over them and said. "What lives down there?"

"Prairie dogs," I said.

"What are they?" he said.

"Well," I said, "they're something like rats. They belong to the rodent family."

"What are all these things doing on my land?" my uncle said.

"They don't know it's your land," I said. "They've been living here a long while!"

"I don't think so," I said.

"Do you think I scared it or anything?" my uncle said.

"I don't know for sure," I said.

"If I did," my uncle said, "I didn't mean to. I am going to build a house here some day."

"I didn't know that," I said.

"Of course," my uncle said. "I'm going to build a magnificent house."

"It's pretty far away," I said.

"It's only an hour from town," my uncle said.

"If you go fifty miles an hour," I said.

"It's not fifty miles to town," my uncle said. "it's thirty-seven."

"Well, you've got to take a little time out for rough roads," I said.

"I'll build me the finest house in the world," my uncle said. "What else lives on this land?"

"Well," I said, "there are three or four kinds of snakes."

"Poison or non-poison?" my uncle said.

"Mostly non-poison," I said. "The rattlesnake is poison, though."

"Do you mean to tell there are rattlesnakes on this land?" my uncle said.

"This is the kind of land rattlesnakes usually live on," I said.

"How many?" my uncle said.

"Per acre?" I said. "Or on the whole six hundred and eighty acres?"

"Per acre," my uncle said.

"Well," I said, "I'd say there are about three per acre, conservatively".

"Three per acre," my uncle shouted, "conservatively?"

"May be only two," I said.

"How many is that to the whole place?" my uncle said.

"Well, let's see," I said, "Two per acre. Six hundred and eighty acres. About fifteen hundred of them."

"Fifteen hundred of them?" my uncle said.

"An acre is pretty big," I said. "Two rattlesnakes per acre isn't many. You don't often see them."

"What else have we got around here that's poison?" my uncle said.

"I don't know of anything else," I said. "All the other things are harmless. The rattlesnakes are pretty harmless too, unless you step on them."

"All right," my uncle said. "You walk ahead and watch where you're going. If you see a rattlesnake, don't step on it. I don't want you to die at the age of eleven."

"Yes, sir," I said, "I'll watch carefully."

We turned around and walked back to the Ford. I didn't see any rattlesnakes on the way back. We got into the car and my uncle lighted a cigarette.

"I'm going to make a garden of this awful desolation," he said.

"Yes sir," I said.

"I know what my problems are," my uncle said, "and I know how to solve them."

"How?" I said.

"Do you mean the horny toads or the rattlesnakes?" my uncle said.

"I mean the problems," I said.

"Well," my uncle said, "the first thing I'm going to do is hire some Mexicans and put them to work."

"Doing what?" I said.

"Clearing the land," my uncle said. "Then I'm going to have them dig for water."

"Dig where?" I said.

"Straight down," my uncle said. "After we get water, I'm going to have them plow the land and then I'm going to plant."

"What are you going to plant?" I said. "Wheat?"

"Wheat?" my uncle shouted. "What do I want with wheat? Bread is five cents a loaf. I'm going to plant pomegranate trees."

"How much are pomegranates?" I said.

"Pomegranates," my uncle said, "are practically unknown in this country."

"Is that all you're going to plant?" I said.

"I have in mind," my uncle said. "planting several other kinds of trees."

"Peach trees?" I said.

"About ten acres," my uncle said.

"How about apricots?" I said.

"By all means," my uncle said. "The apricot is a lovely fruit. Lovely in shape, with a glorious flavour and a most delightful pit. I shall plant about twenty acres of apricot trees."

"I hope the Mexicans don't have any trouble finding water," I said. "Is there any water under this land?"

"Of course," my uncle said. "The important thing is to get started. I shall instruct the men to watch out for rattlesnakes."

"Pomegranates," he said. "Peaches, apricots. What else?"

"Figs?" I said.

"Thirty acres of figs," my uncle said.

"How about mulberries?" I said. "The mulberry tree is a very nice looking tree."

"Mulberries," my uncle said. He moved his tongue around in his mouth. "A nice tree," he said. "A tree I know well in

the old country. How many acres would you suggest?"

"About ten," I said.

"All right," he said. "What else?"

"Olive trees are nice," I said.

"Yes they are," my uncle said. "One of the nicest. About ten acres of olive trees. What else?"

"Well," I said, "I don't suppose apple trees would grow on this kind of land."

"I suppose not," my uncle said. "I don't like apples anyway."

He started the car and we drove off the dry land on to the dry road. The car bounced about slowly until we reached the road and then we began to travel at a higher rate of speed.

"One thing," my uncle said. "When we get home I would rather you didn't mention this farm to the folks."

"Yes sir," I said ("Farm?" I thought "What farm?")

"I want to surprise them," my uncle said. "You know how your grandmother is. I'll go ahead with my plans and when everything is in order I'll take the whole family out to the farm and surprise them."

"Yes sir," I said.

"Not a word to a living soul," my uncle said.

"Yes sir," I said.

Well, the Mexicans went to work and cleared the land. They cleared about ten acres of it in about two months. There were seven of them. They worked with shovels and hoes. They didn't understand anything about anything. It all seemed very strange, but they never complained. They were being paid and that was the thing that counted. They were two brothers and their sons. One day the older brother, Diego, very politely asked my uncle what it was they were

supposed to be doing.

"Senor," he said, "please forgive me. Why are we cutting down the cactus?"

"I'm going to farm this land," my uncle said.

The other Mexicans asked Diego in Mexican what my uncle had said and Diego told them.

They didn't believe it was worth the trouble to tell my uncle he couldn't do it. They just went on cutting down the cactus.

The cactus, however, stayed down only for a short while. The land which had been first cleared was already rich again with fresh cactus and brush. My uncle made this observation with considerable amazement.

"It takes deep plowing to get rid of cactus," I said, "you've got to plow it out."

My uncle talked the matter over with Ryan, who had a farm implement business. Ryan told him not to fool with horses. The modern thing to do was to turn a good tractor loose on the land and do a year's work in a day.

So my uncle bought a John Deere tractor. It was beautiful. A mechanic from Ryan's taught Diego how to operate the tractor, and the next day when my uncle and I reached the land we could see the tractor away out in the desolation and we could hear it booming in the awful emptiness of the desert. It sounded pretty awful. It was awful. My uncle thought it was wonderful.

"Progress," he said. "There's the modern age for you. Ten thousand years ago," he said, "it would have taken a hundred men a week to do what the tractor's done today."

"Ten thousand year ago?" I said, "You mean yesterday."

"Anyway," my uncle said, "there's nothing like these modern conveniences."

"The tractor isn't a convenience," I said.

"What is it, then?" my uncle said. "Doesn't the driver sit?"

"He couldn't very well stand," I said.

"Any time they let you sit," my uncle said, "It's a convenience. Can you whistle?"

"Yes, sir," I said. "What sort of song would you like to hear?"

"Song?" My uncle said. "I don't want to hear any song. I want you to whistle at the Mexican on the tractor."

"What for?" I said.

"Never mind what for," my uncle said. "Just whistle. I want him to know we are here and that we are pleased with his work. He's probably plowed twenty acres."

"Yes, sir," I said.

I put the second and third fingers of each hand into my mouth and blew with all my might. It was good and loud. Nevertheless, it didn't seem as if Diego had heard me. He was pretty far away. We were walking towards him anyway, so I couldn't figure out why my uncle wanted me to whistle at him.

"Once again," he said.

I whistled once again, but Diego didn't hear.

"Louder," my uncle said.

This time I gave it all, I had, and my uncle put his hands over his ears. My face got very red too. The Mexican on the tractor heard the whistle this time. He slowed the tractor down, turned it around, and began plowing straight across the field towards us.

"Do you want him to do that?" I said.

"It doesn't matter," my uncle said.

In less than a minute and a half, the tractor and the

Mexican arrived. The Mexican seemed very delighted. He wiped dirt and perspiration off his face and got down from the tractor.

"Senor," he said, "this is wonderful."

"I'm glad you like it," my uncle said.

"Would you like a ride?" the Mexican asked my uncle.

My uncle didn't know for sure. He looked at me.

"Go ahead," he said. "Hop on. Have a little ride."

Diego got on the tractor and helped me on. He sat on the metal seat and I stood behind him, holding him. The tractor began to shake, then jumped and then began to move. It moved swiftly and made a good deal of noise. The Mexican drove around in a big circle and brought the tractor back to my uncle. I jumped off.

"All right," my uncle said to the Mexican. "Go back to your work."

The Mexican drove the tractor back to where he was plowing.

My uncle didn't get water out of the land until many months later. He had wells dug all over the place, but no water came out of the wells. Of course, he had motor pumps too, but even then no water came out. A water specialist named Roy came out from Texas with his two younger brothers and they began investigating the land. They told my uncle they'd get water for him. It took them three months, the water was muddy, and there wasn't much of it.

There was a trickle of muddy water. The specialist told my uncle matters would improve with time and went back to Texas.

Now half the land was cleared and plowed and there was water, so the time had come to plant.

We planted pomegranate trees. They were of the finest

quality and very expensive. We planted seven hundred of them. I myself planted a hundred. My uncle planted quite a few. We had a twenty acre orchard of pomegranate trees away over to hell and gone in the strangest desolation anybody ever saw. It was the loveliest looking absurdity imaginable and my uncle was crazy about it. The only trouble was his money was giving out. Instead of going ahead and trying to make a garden of the whole six hundred and eighty acres, he decided to devote all his time and energy and money to the pomegranate trees.

"Only for the time being," he said. "Until we begin to market the pomegranates and get our money back."

"Yes, sir," I said.

I didn't know for sure, but I figured we wouldn't be getting any pomegranates to speak of, off those little trees for two or three years at least, but I didn't say anything. My uncle got rid of the Mexican workers and he and I took over the farm. We had the tractor and a lot of land, so every now and then we drove out to the farm and drove the tractor around, plowing up cactus and turning over the soil between the pomegranate trees. This went on for three years.

"One of these days," my uncle said, "you'll see the loveliest garden in the world in this desert."

The water situation didn't improve with time, either. Every once in a while there would be a sudden generous spurt of water containing only a few pebbles and my uncle would be greatly pleased but the next day it would be muddy again and there would be only a little trickle. The pomegranate trees fought bravely for life, but they never did get enough water to come out with any fruit.

There were blossoms after the fourth year. This was a great triumph for my uncle. He went out of his head with joy

when he saw them.

Nothing ever came of the blossoms, though. They were very beautiful, but that was about all. Purple and lonely.

That year my uncle harvested three small pomegranates.

I ate one, he ate one and we kept the other one up in his office.

The following year I was fifteen. A lot of wonderful things had happened to me. I mean, I had read a number of good writers and I'd grown as tall as my uncle. The farm was still our secret. It had cost my uncle a lot of money, but he was always under the impression that very soon he was going to start marketing his pomegranates and get his money back and go on with his plan to make a garden in the desert.

The trees didn't fare very well. They grew a little, but it was hardly noticeable. Quite a few of them withered and died.

"That's average," my uncle said. "Twenty trees to an acre is only average. We won't plant new trees just now. We'll do that later."

He was still paying for the land, too.

The following year he harvested about two hundred pomegranates. He and I did the harvesting. They were pretty sad looking pomegranates. We packed them in nice looking boxes and my uncle shipped them to a wholesale produce house in Chicago. There were eleven boxes.

We didn't hear from the wholesale produce house for a month, so one night my uncle made a long distance call. The produce man, D'Agostino, told my uncle nobody wanted pomegranates.

"How much are you asking per box?" my uncle shouted over the phone.

"One dollar," D'Agostino shouted back.

"That's not enough," my uncle shouted. "I won't take a nickel less than five dollars a box."

"They didn't want them at one dollar a box," D'Agostino shouted.

"Why not?" my uncle shouted.

"They don't know what they are," D'Agostino shouted.

"What kind of business man are you anyway?" my uncle shouted. "They're pomegranates. I want five dollars a box."

"I can't sell them," the produce man shouted. "I ate one myself and I don't see anything so wonderful about them."

"You're crazy," my uncle shouted. "there is no other fruit in the world like pomegranate. Five dollars a box isn't half enough."

"What shall I do with them?" D'Agostino shouted. "I can't sell them. I don't want them."

"I see," my uncle whispered. "Ship them back. Ship them back—express collect."

The phone call cost my uncle about seventeen dollars.

So the eleven boxes came back.

My uncle and I ate most of the pomegranates.

The following year my uncle couldn't make any more payments on the land. He gave the papers back to the man who had sold him the land. I was in the office at the time.

"Mr Griffith," my uncle said, "I've got to give you back your property, but I would like to ask a little favour. I've planted twenty acres of pomegranate trees out there on that land and I'd appreciate it very much if you'd let me take care of those trees."

"Take care of them?" Mr Griffith said. "What in the world for?"

My uncle tried to explain, but couldn't. it was too much to try to explain to a man who wasn't sympathetic.

So my uncle lost the land, and the trees, too.

About three years later he and I drove out to the land and walked out to the pomegranate orchard. The trees were all dead. The soil was heavy again with cactus and desert brush. Except for the small dead pomegranate trees the place was exactly, the way it had been all the years of the world.

We walked around in the orchard for a while and then went back to the car.

We got into the car and drove back to town.

We didn't say anything because there was such an awful lot to say, and no language to say it in.

The Taipan

Somerset Maugham

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

William Somerset Maugham, an English short-story writer, poet and dramatist was born in Paris. His father was a lawyer. His mother died when he was only eight years old. Two years later his father passed away, leaving him an orphan at the age of ten. He moved in with his aunt and uncle in Whitstable soon after. Maugham was educated at the King's School in Canterbury and Heidelberg University before he went on to study medicine at St Thomas's Hospital in London.

Encouraged by the success of his first novel, *Liza of Lambeth* (1897) Maugham took to writing full time. He received great appreciation as a novelist with the publishing of *Of Human Bondage* in 1915, which was almost an autobiographical novel. His most famous plays include *Our Betters* (1917), *The Circle* (1921), and *For Services Rendered* (1932). Though his plays were successful at the time they were written, their popularity did not last too long. The other novels, particularly *The Moon and Sixpence* (1919) and *Cakes and Ale* (1930), still hold their appeal and are varied in their subject matter and settings. His works are characterized by a simple style, cosmopolitan settings, and a keen perception of human nature.

ABOUT THE STORY

The Taipan is a successful community man in the story who has risen from his humble beginnings. He chuckles at his fellow contemporaries whom he has outlived, little realizing that his own end is at hand, until he gets a premonition of his doom.

No one knew better than he that he was an important person. He was number one in not the least important branch of the most important English firm in China. He had worked his way up through solid ability and he looked back with a faint smile at the callow clerk who had come out to China thirty years before. When he remembered the modest home he had come from, a little red house in a long row of little red houses, in Bames, a suburb which, aiming desperately at the genteel, achieves only a sordid melancholy, and compared it with the magnificent stone mansion, with its wide verandas and spacious rooms, which was at once the office of the company and his own residence, he chuckled with satisfaction. He had come a long way since then. He thought of the high tea to which he sat down when he came home from school (he was at St Paul's), with his father and mother and his two sisters, a slice of cold meat, a great deal of bread and butter and plenty of milk in his tea, everybody helping himself, and then he thought of the state in which now he ate his evening meal. He always dressed and whether he was alone or not he expected the three boys to wait at table. His number one boy knew exactly what he liked and he never had to bother himself with the details of housekeeping; but he always had a set dinner with soup and fish, entree, roast, sweet, and savoury, so that if he wanted to ask anyone in at the last moment he could. He liked his food and he did not see why when he was alone he should have less good a dinner than when he had a guest.

He had indeed gone far. That was why he did not care to go home now, he had not been to England for ten years, and he took his leave in Japan or Vancouver, where he was sure of meeting old friends from the China coast. He knew no one at home. His sisters had married in their own station,

their husbands were clerks and their sons were clerks; there was nothing between him and them; they bored him. He satisfied the claims of relationship by sending them every Christmas a piece of fine silk, some elaborate embroidery, or a case of tea. He was not a mean man and as long as his mother lived he had made her an allowance. But when the time came for him to retire he had no intention of going back to England, he had seen too many men do that and he knew how often it was a failure; he meant to take a house near the racecourse in Shanghai: what with bridge and his ponies and golf he expected to get through the rest of his life very comfortably. But he had a good many years before he need think of retiring. In another five or six years Higgins would be going home and then he would take charge of the head office in Shanghai. Meanwhile he was very happy where he was, he could save money, which you couldn't do in Shanghai, and have a good time into the bargain. This place had another advantage over Shanghai: he was the most prominent man in the community and what he said went. Even the consul took care to keep on the right side of him. Once a consul and he had been at loggerheads and it was not he who had gone to the wall. The taipan thrust out his jaw pugnaciously as he thought of the incident.

But he smiled, for he felt in an excellent humour. He was walking back to his office from a capital luncheon at the Hong-Kong and Shanghai Bank. They did you very well there. The food was first-rate and there was plenty of liquor. He had started with a couple of cocktails, then he had some excellent sauterne and he had finished up with two glasses of port and some fine old brandy. He felt good. And when he left he did a thing that was rare with him; he walked. His bearers with his chair kept a few paces behind him in case he felt inclined

to slip into it, but he enjoyed stretching his legs. He did not get enough exercise these days. Now that he was too heavy to ride it was difficult to get exercise. But if he was too heavy to ride he could still keep ponies, and as he strolled along in the balmy air he thought of the spring meeting. He had a couple of griffins that he had hopes of and one of the lads in his office had turned out a fine jockey (he must see they didn't sneak him away, old Higgins in Shanghai would give a pot of money to get him over there) and he ought to pull off two or three races. He flattered himself that he had the finest stable in the city. He pouted his broad chest like a pigeon. It was a beautiful day, and it was good to be alive.

He paused as he came to the cemetery. It stood there, neat and orderly, as an evident sign of the community's opulence. He never passed the cemetery without a little glow of pride. He was pleased to be an Englishman. For the cemetery stood in a place, valueless when it was chosen, which with the increase of the city's affluence was now worth a great deal of money. It had been suggested that the graves should be moved to another spot and the land sold for building, but the feeling of the community was against it. It gave the taipan a sense of satisfaction to think that their dead rested on the most valuable site on the island. It showed that there were things they cared for more than money. Money be blown! When it came to 'the things that mattered' (this was a favourite phrase with the taipan), well, one remembered that money wasn't everything.

And now he thought he would take a stroll through. He looked at the graves. They were neatly kept and the pathways were free from weeds. There was a look of prosperity. And as he sauntered along he read the names on the tombstones. Here were three side by side: the captain, the first mate, and

the second mate of the barque Mary Baxter, who had all perished together in the typhoon of 1908. He remembered it well. There was a little group of two missionaries, their wives and children, who had been massacred during the Boxer troubles. Shocking thing that had been! Not that he took much stock in missionaries; but, hang it all, one couldn't have these damned Chinese massacring them. Then he came to a cross with a name on it he knew. Good chap, Edward Mulock, but he couldn't stand his liquor, drank himself to death, poor devil, at twenty-five; the taipan had known a lot of them do that; there were several more neat crosses with a man's name on them and the age, twenty-five, twenty-six, or twenty-seven; it was always the same story: they had come out to China; they had never seen so much money before, they were good fellows and they wanted to drink with the rest: they couldn't stand it, and there they were in the cemetery. You had to have a strong head and a fine constitution to drink drink for drink on the China coast. Of course it was very sad, but the taipan could hardly help a smile when he thought how many of those young fellows he had drunk underground. And there was a death that had been useful, a fellow in his own firm, senior to him and a clever chap too: if that fellow had lived he might not have been taipan now. Truly the ways of fate were inscrutable. Ah, and here was little Mrs Turner, Violet Turner, she had been a pretty little thing, he had had quite an affair with her; he had been devilish cut up when she died. He looked at her age on the tombstone. She'd be no chicken if she were alive now. And as he thought of all those dead people a sense of satisfaction spread through him. He had beaten them all. They were dead and he was alive, and by George he'd scored them off. His eyes collected in one picture all those crowded graves and he

smiled scornfully. He very nearly rubbed his hands.

"No one ever thought I was a fool," he muttered.

He had a feeling of good-natured contempt for the gibbering dead. Then, as he strolled along, he came suddenly upon two coolies digging a grave. He was astonished, for he had not heard that anyone in the community was dead.

"Who the devil's that for?" he said aloud.

The coolies did not even look at him, they went on with their work, standing in the grave, deep down, and they shovelled up heavy clods of earth. Though he had been so long in China he knew no Chinese, in his day it was not thought necessary to learn the damned language, and he asked the coolies in English whose grave they were digging. They did not understand. They answered him in Chinese and he cursed them for ignorant fools. He knew that Mrs Broome's child was ailing and it might have died, but he would certainly have heard of it, and besides, that wasn't a child's grave, it was a man's and a big man's too. It was uncanny. He wished he hadn't gone into that cemetery; he hurried out and stepped into his chair. His good-humour had all gone and there was an uneasy frown on his face. The moment he got back to his office he called to his number two:

"I say, Peters, who's dead, d'you know?"

But Peters knew nothing. The taipan was puzzled. He called one of the native clerks and sent him to the cemetery to ask the coolies. He began to sign his letters. The clerk came back and said the coolies had gone and there was no one to ask. The taipan began to feel vaguely annoyed: he did not like things to happen of which he knew nothing.

His own boy would know, his boy always knew everything, and he sent for him; but the boy had heard of no death in

the community.

"I knew no one was dead," said the taipan irritably. "But what's the grave for?"

He told the boy to go to the overseer of the cemetery and find out what the devil he had dug a grave for when no one was dead.

"Let me have a whisky and soda before you go," he added, as the boy was leaving the room.

He did not know why the sight of the grave had made him uncomfortable. But he tried to put it out of his mind. He felt better when he had drunk the whisky, and he finished his work. He went upstairs and turned over the pages of *Punch*. In a few minutes he would go to the club and play a rubber or two of bridge before dinner. But it would ease his mind to hear what his boy had to say and he waited for his return. In a little while the boy came back and he brought the overseer with him.

"What are you having a grave dug for?" he asked the overseer point-blank. "Nobody's dead."

"I no dig grave," said the man.

"What the devil do you mean by that? There were two coolies digging a grave this afternoon."

The two Chinese looked at one another. Then the boy said they had been to the cemetery together. There was no new grave there.

The taipan only just stopped himself from speaking.

"But damn it all, I saw it myself," were the words on the tip of his tongue.

But he did not say them. He grew very red as he choked them down. The two Chinese looked at him with their steady eyes. For a moment his breath failed him.

"All right. Get out," he gasped.

But as soon as they were gone he shouted for the boy again, and when he came, maddeningly impassive, he told him to bring some whisky. He rubbed his sweating face with a handkerchief. His hand trembled when he lifted the glass to his lips. They could say what they liked, but he had seen the grave. Why, he could hear still the dull thud as the coolies threw the spadefuls of earth on the ground above them. What did it mean? He could feel his heart beating. He felt strangely ill at ease. But he pulled himself together. It was all nonsense. If there was no grave there it must have been a hallucination. The best thing he could do was to go to the club, and if he ran across the doctor he would ask him to give him a look over.

Everyone in the club looked just the same as ever. He did not know why he should have expected them to look different. It was a comfort. These men, living for many years with one another—lives that were methodically regulated, had acquired a number of little idiosyncrasies—one of them hummed incessantly while he played bridge, another insisted on drinking beer through a straw—and these tricks which had so often irritated the taipan now gave him a sense of security. He needed it, for he could not get out of his head that strange sight he had seen. He played bridge very badly; his partner was censorious, and the taipan lost his temper. He thought the men were looking at him oddly. He wondered what they saw in him that was unaccustomed.

Suddenly he felt he could not bear to stay in the club any longer. As he went out he saw the doctor reading *The Times* in the reading-room, but he could not bring himself to speak to him. He wanted to see for himself whether that grave was really there, and stepping into his chair he told his bearers to take him to the cemetery. You couldn't have a hallucination

twice, could you? And besides, he would take the overseer in with him and if the grave was not there he wouldn't see it, and if it was he'd give the overseer the soundest thrashing he'd ever had. But the overseer was nowhere to be found. He had gone out and taken the keys with him. When the taipan found he could not get into the cemetery he felt suddenly exhausted. He got back into his chair and told his bearers to take him home. He would lie down for half an hour before dinner. He was tired out. That was it. He had heard that people had hallucinations when they were tired. When his boy came in to put out his clothes for dinner it was only by an effort of will that he got up. He had a strong inclination not to dress that evening, but he resisted it: he made it a rule to dress, he had dressed every evening for twenty years and it would never do to break his rule. But he ordered a bottle of champagne with his dinner and that made him feel more comfortable. Afterwards he told the boy to bring him the best brandy. When he had drunk a couple of glasses of this he felt himself again. Hallucinations be damned! He went to the billiard-room and practised a few difficult shots. There could not be much the matter with him when his eye was so sure. When he went to bed he sank immediately into a sound sleep.

But suddenly he awoke. He had dreamed of that open grave and the coolies digging leisurely. He was sure he had seen them. It was absurd to say it was a hallucination when he had seen them with his own eyes. Then he heard the rattle of the night-watchman going his rounds. It broke upon the stillness of the night so harshly that it made him jump out of his skin. And then terror seized him. He felt a horror of the winding multitudinous streets of the Chinese city, and there was something ghastly and terrible in the convoluted

roofs of the temples with their devils grimacing and tortured. He loathed the smells that assaulted his nostrils. And the people. Those myriads of blue-clad coolies, and the beggars in their filthy rags, and the merchants and the magistrates, sleek, smiling, and inscrutable, in their long black gowns. They seemed to press upon him with menace. He hated the country China. Why had he ever come? He was panic-stricken now. He must get out. He would not stay another year, another month. What did he care about Shanghai?

"Oh, my god," he cried, "if I were only safely back in England."

He wanted to go home. If he had to die he wanted to die in England. He could not bear to be buried among all these yellow men, with their slanting eyes and their grinning faces. He wanted to be buried at home, not in that grave he had seen that day. He could never rest there. Never. What did it matter what people thought? Let them think what they liked. The only thing that mattered was to get away while he had the chance.

He got out of bed and wrote to the head of the firm and said he had discovered he was dangerously ill. He must be replaced. He could not stay longer than was absolutely necessary. He must go home at once.

They found the letter in the morning clenched in the taipan's hand. He had slipped down between the desk and the chair. He was stone dead.